



THE DRAMATIC VERSION OF

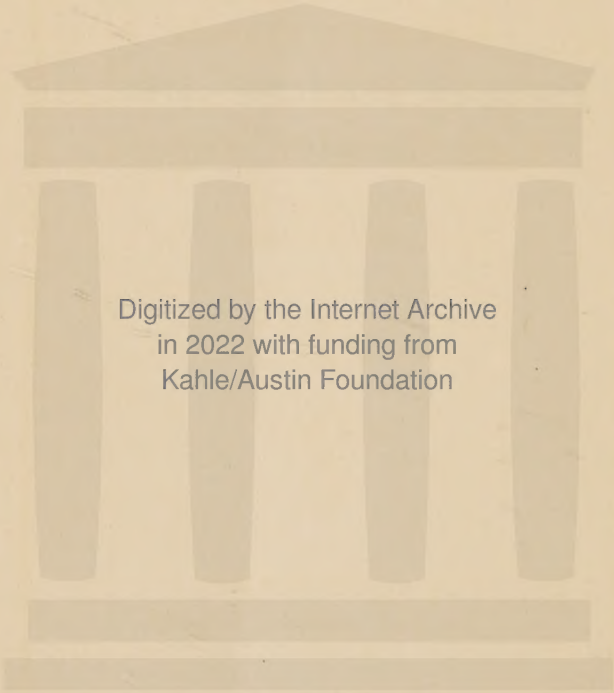
The Birds' Christmas Carol

By
Kate Douglas Wiggin



THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS CAROL

A PLAY



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The Birds' Christmas Carol

Dramatic Version

By

Kate Douglas Wiggin

In collaboration with
Helen Ingersoll



Boston and New York
Houghton Mifflin Company

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AS AUTHOR AND PROPRIETOR

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THE AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS CAROL is commonly alluded to as my first literary effort, but the story is somewhat ill-described in that phrase, for it was written quite without effort and with no thought that it might ever be classed as a literary product. The sole idea that brought it into being was that it might be printed in a humble paper-covered volume and sold for the benefit of the Silver Street Kindergarten in San Francisco, the first free kindergarten west of the Rocky Mountains, founded in 1878.

A few years later the pamphlet found its way to the offices of Houghton Mifflin Company in Boston, where the senior member of the firm took it under his personal protection, the date of its issue marking the beginning of a loyal friendship between author and publishers that has continued unbroken up to the present day.

It was not many months before selections from the book began to appear on the programmes of public readers, and in due course it was given in one form or another by hundreds of academies and seminaries, grammar, high, normal, and Sunday schools, as well as by institutions for blind and deaf-mute children. Sometimes it appeared in tableaux, sometimes in pantomime, with and without explanatory readings; but more often it was "acted" under the direction of some one who arranged the various conversations

of the book with due regard to continuity, the loosely connected scenes serving as a modest and rudimentary form of "play."

All this seems somewhat mysterious in view of the fact that the original story contained no drama, in the ordinary sense of the word. It may have been the "Ruggleses in the rear" who tempted the projectors of these amateur entertainments; for perhaps I may have infused a certain amount of vigor and vitality into this family, since its presentation on the boards has always been greeted with laughter and applause, even when the more delicate scenes with Carol, her mother and father and Uncle Jack, may have proved a little dull.

At all events, the Ruggleses have made their appearance on the amateur stage quite regularly for more than thirty years. Mrs. Ruggles has even had the honor of being impersonated by a distinguished professor of history in Harvard University, who, at an impromptu gathering in Cambridge, drew to his support several brother scholars who convulsed the audience by their antics as the little Ruggleses.

Many amateur dramatizations of the book have been sent me for criticism, but though they doubtless served their purpose more or less agreeably, all of them left much to be desired, in that, with commendable courtesy, their authors refrained from adding to the text, and this, for dramatic purposes, was necessary.

A book that begins with the birth of a child and ends with its death, presents, it must be admitted,

some difficulty to the budding dramatist; and many of the little "Carol plays" were so pathological and so painful that the youthful part of any audience would have been in tears whenever the Ruggleses removed themselves from the stage.

In the present arrangement the birth of Carol is depicted in a sort of fairy prologue, in which the welcome gift of the Christmas baby to the Bird household is shown in a series of pictures.

As to the death of the Christmas child twelve years later, it is touched upon very lightly in the original story and retired still farther into the background in this dramatic version. An imaginary "Doctor Bob" has been introduced, one of a long line of physicians who have tried to deliver the child from the burden of her weakness and her crutch; and the last scene of the play suggests to the audience none but healing thoughts. The Angel of the Prologue comes softly to Carol in her happy sleep, lifts the crutch and vanishes with a smile. The curtain goes down on a peaceful picture, the merry chatter of the Ruggles children on their homeward way, mingling with the Christmas music that drifts into the big house from the church next door.

While the slenderness of the story will not admit of much addition in the way of plot and counter-plot, suspense and conflict, my collaborator and I determined to bring Mrs. Ruggles into the Christmas party, thus linking both families more closely together, as well as providing the best acting part with new situations.

To prevent a certain monotony of goodness in the Bird family we have endowed Mr. Bird (without asking his consent) with decidedly aristocratic tendencies, and a certain "fussiness" with regard to the invasion of his domestic peace by the boisterous and lowly-born Ruggleses,—reduced in number from nine to seven, in order to simplify the problems of the stage manager.

We have created a small element of suspense as to the final fate of the Ruggleses' dwelling in the rear, making the audience fear that this bugbear may shortly be removed, in order to gratify the eye of Carol's fastidious father. We have also suggested a possible "heart interest" between Uncle Jack and Elfrida, Carol's devoted companion.

Out of these changes fresh material has grown, and I hope that the loyal readers of the old book will find nothing to surprise or offend them in the new one, but will feel rather that they have gained a little further knowledge about a group of people whom they met and liked, years and years ago.

SUGGESTIONS TO THE AMATEUR PLAYER

If the stage manager or director reads the entire text of the volume, thus getting its spirit and intention, he can then easily modify the play in accordance with his particular circumstances and limitations. Sunday-school room, vestry, town hall, auditorium of a public school, each of these presents its own difficulties, while the money to be spent on the

production, and the talent of the performers, will differ in every case. Obstacles which look very formidable at first prove to be, after all, not insurmountable; for there exists, in every town, a genius for the inventing of costumes, lighting effects, theatrical properties and scenery, who needs only to be discovered and encouraged. The background of each act should be made, if not perfect, at all events, as convincing as possible, and above all, there should be a happy, serene, spontaneous atmosphere about the entire entertainment, so that the true spirit of Christmas will gradually be revealed.

The Prologue, which, as it stands, needs the mechanical and electrical devices which only the theater can supply, may be omitted altogether, and the curtain may rise on the first act without any preliminaries; but there are two ways of using the Prologue, both of them possible to amateurs.

First: Tableaux and Pantomime. The Bird house and the church can be imagined, "off stage," and their existence indicated by the gestures of the angels. Illustrate as much of the text as you find possible, making it a series of pictures conveying the idea, and accompany it with the most appropriate Christmas music that you can devise.

Second: Make a "story" of the Prologue and let the right person tell it to the audience, converting it, by slight changes of phraseology, into a series of word pictures ending with these lines: "*The Home-Finder gently closes the door of the Bird house; the hallway is quite dark, but the windows upstairs grow very*

bright and the angels are seen passing them carrying the child. — The Christmas baby has found a home!” At the last words of the story the concealed choir (it may be two or a dozen voices) sings; “Carol, brothers, Carol”; the identity of the newly arrived snow-bird is established and the audience is ready for the play.

When the Prologue is omitted altogether, you may preface the performance by having some one recite the following verses: —

A bird flutter'd downward from Paradise
And sought for an earthly nest;
For the blessed shield of a mother's wing
And the warmth of a mother's breast.

An angel who noted the birdling's flight,
A welcoming household sought,
And to just one home out of all the world
The heavenly nestling brought.

Oh, a soft, sweet, tender birdling she,
With a love-light in her eyes;
But a broken wing was the price she paid
For leaving her Paradise.

Yet, spite of trials, the birdling grew,
And she caroled amid her pain
Till the gray of the household turned to rose
Like a rainbow after the rain.

As for the furnishings and fittings of the stage, do the best you can, always remembering that if the actors are in the right spirit they will be just so many instruments of suggestion, establishing that wonderful and mysterious collaboration between players

and audience that is always in force when things are at their best. Carol herself is much more important than her "fairy-story bedroom," and a very inadequate Ruggles kitchen will be quite forgotten when the right Mrs. Ruggles appears on the scene.

Mrs. Ruggles's nationality has been much discussed and she has often been played with an Irish brogue. Names of characters meant little to one who was impulsively writing her first story and I cannot remember why the big household in the little house was dignified with the name of Ruggles. Representatives of the family proved to me quite conclusively that it was a mistaken choice; but when, in a youthful enthusiasm of well-doing, I endeavored to substitute another and less aristocratic surname, the creatures of my imagination had somehow established themselves in the public favor; so that "Ruggleses in the Rear" they remained from that time forth. Some of the children have Irish Christian names, it is true, but not all of them; and that Mrs. Ruggles was born a McGrill may point to an ancestry not altogether American; but I should "play" or "read" the good lady exactly as she is written, with no hint of brogue, but with the dialect I gave her when she was born.

Make Uncle Jack as magnetic, jolly, and genial as possible, and do not over-accentuate Mr. Bird's peculiarities; remembering that if he had been left in the book, where he began life, he might have been as colorless and praiseworthy as he liked and no one would have criticized him!

Mrs. Bird and Elfrida must be as pretty and

charming as may be, since their lines offer few dramatic opportunities. As for the Ruggleses, when once they are clothed and set upon the stage they can generally be relied upon to supply their own motive power.

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN.

SCENES

PROLOGUE. *A Little Snow-Bird*

The outside of the Bird house, the low roof of the Ruggles dwelling behind, and the church beside it, on a snowy Christmas morning.

ACT I. *The Birds' Nest*

Carol Bird's Fairy-Story room, on a December afternoon twelve years later.

ACT II. *Some Other Birds are taught to fly*

Christmas Day in the Ruggles Kitchen.

ACT III. *The Angel of the Crutches*

Christmas evening in the Fairy-Story room.

"Sweet Bird, thy bower is ever green,
Thy sky is ever clear;
Thou hast no sorrow in thy song,
No winter in thy year."

CHARACTERS

ANGELS OF THE PROLOGUE (three or five)

THE BIRD FAMILY

Carol Bird, the "Snow-Bird" grown-up.

Mrs. Bird, her mother.

Mr. Donald Bird, her father, in the nest, but not quite of it.

Uncle Jack, a Bird of Passage.

Elfrida Clifford, Carol's nurse, a Bird of another feather.

The Butler.

THEIR NEIGHBORS — THE RUGGLESSES IN THE REAR

Mrs. Ruggles, who was a McGrill.

Sarah Maud,

Peter,

Peoria,

Kitty,

Clement,

Cornelius,

and

Larry.

} The Seven Little Ruggleses.

PEOPLE

CAROL BIRD, twelve years old, distinctly blonde type (as better expressing the necessary spirituality), pretty, quaint, generous little creature, who makes light of her slight physical infirmity. She radiates good will, but her influence is quite unconscious. She seems a normal, laughter-loving child, and *must* be acted as lightly and gracefully as possible, with no emphasis upon the *pathetic*. Though fragile, she does not look unhealthy or feeble. She uses her crutch so nimbly that there is no sense of weariness or effort. That the child's heart is a little tired by its brief journey in the world, does not, and should not be obvious to the audience. Carol is one of those children who come to earth "trailing clouds of glory," and who depart, like heavenly visitants, leaving the world, not sadder, but brighter.

MR. BIRD, Carol's father, a successful banker who knows and appreciates worldly values; is handsome and fastidious, has strong class prejudices; is ultra correct in dress and speech, and impatient of annoyances.

MRS. BIRD, chiefly Carol's mother; after that, Mr. Bird's wife.

JACK BIRD, Carol's uncle, a "Bird of Passage" who enjoys life, ignores conventions, and does as he pleases, but is pleased most if others are pleased also.

ELFRIDA CLIFFORD, Carol's nurse and companion, a handsome young woman of about twenty-five, self-possessed, quiet in manner, simple, strong, and womanly.

The Ruggleses in the Rear

MRS. RUGGLES, mother of the Ruggleses in the Rear: a

rushed, pushed, energetic, occasionally irascible mother of seven children. She has considerable family pride and considerable ambition for her offspring; is voluble and good-hearted.

SARAH MAUD, the oldest of the brood: a patient, timid drudge. Aged fourteen years.

PETER, a lank youth of thirteen.

PEORIA, has red hair and freckles. Aged eleven.

KITTY, considered the family beauty: she has much "manner." Aged ten.

CLEMENT, the alert member of the family; rather mischievous; quick in thought and action. Aged nine years.

CORNELIUS, a leaden child of eight, who smiles much and says little.

LARRY, a rolypoly, whose years should be as few as possible, — say six. He tumbles about, dogging Sarah Maud's steps, giving only occasional indication of separate existence.

ANGELS, — at least four or five lithe young girls who dance. There is a possibility of doubling the parts and using the three Ruggles girls, *if* the beauty and personality requisite for the angels can be successfully hidden by the comedy make-up of the Ruggleses.

THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS CAROL

THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS CAROL

PROLOGUE

THE CHRISTMAS BABY FINDS A HOME

(IN PANTOMIME)

The curtain lifts, showing a Christmas Eve snow-storm: a soft, gentle fall of large flakes. The stage grows slowly lighter, and to right center is seen a substantial dwelling-house, the stones of which are meshed by the wood of leafless vines in whose crooks are caught soft mounds of the snow. To the left of the house, extending across the stage, is a snow-covered hedge; to the left, back, is a low, stone church. The lights from its small-paned windows fall across the hedge. The church is so placed that these side windows are clearly seen; but the entrance and steeple are to the front, almost in a line with the hedge, and to the left of the stage. Between the church and the house is seen a low-lying roof of a poorer dwelling. As these details are established, a window in the church is opened. Music is heard faintly. The light from the window gives vague outline to the Home Finding Angel, a gray-cloaked, graceful little figure. As the light grows quickly brighter, the figure becomes more distinct, and, as the snow slowly ceases, moves lightly, dancingly forward. She looks to the sky, then flits across

the stage, returns, again looks up, and this time sees a brilliant star, which is sparkling in the heavens between the steeple of the church and the window of the house. As she watches, the star disappears and a faint light appears in the corner window of the second story of the house: indeed, it is disclosed by the lifting of the curtain and the window by a hand within. The Angel tosses her head gleefully; the hood falls from her golden hair, and the scene becomes thereby a bit lighter. She lifts herself to her wings and flies up to the window and peeps in. Apparently satisfied with what she has seen, she perches there upon the broad ledge and beckons with both hands to right and left. At least four (but they need not be flying Angels) gray-cloaked, graceful little creatures appear from right and left. Two of them carry a bough twined with vines across their shoulders, and from this is hung a queer sort of nest. They are very tender and careful of it. The hoods of their cloaks are tossed off and each head is radiant, while their gowns are of shimmering, soft-colored veils.

The Angel on the window ledge, the Home-Finder, points to the door of the house, and the others go quickly toward it. They form a little group, bending over or caressing the nest; then two of them stand at the house door, ready to open it. The Home-Finder flies down from the ledge, kneels beside the nest, seeming to say a tender good-bye to a baby which is seen through the opening; then she rises quickly and motions to the two at the door. They softly open it, and the other two lift the nest a bit higher and enter. As they cross the threshold, their cloaks fall from their shoulders, and the hall-

way becomes exceedingly bright. The Angels outside put up their hoods, and the only light of the stage is that in the hallway.

The Angels inside the house take the baby from the nest, one holding it in her arms tenderly, another leading the way up the stairs. As they disappear, the light within grows dimmer, until, as the Home-Finder gently closes the door, the hallway is quite dark.

As the curtain begins to fall, the windows upstairs (two at the front, and the one or two seen at the side) grow very bright, and the two Angels and the baby are seen passing them.

The Christmas music at the church, which has been heard throughout the pantomime, continues while the curtain is down, which interval must be as brief as possible.

ACT I

THE BIRDS' NEST.

SCENE: *Carol's Fairy-Story room, twelve years later. Four o'clock on an afternoon during the week before Christmas. The wall, right, is broken by a door to the front, leading into the hall. Across the corner, right back, are wide double doors leading to Carol's bedroom. Rear wall, center, is a large bay window with deep recess. This has thin white draperies, and at each side hang heavy rose-colored curtains, wide enough, when drawn, to conceal the recess. In the left wall, front, are windows through which the low sun shines very brightly. About the walls, as wainscoting, are low, white-painted bookcases, filled with brightly colored books: above these, in narrow gilt framework, runs a row of paintings illustrating fairy tales—all in blue, gold, silver, and a rose deeper than the curtains. Above the pictures a pale pink wall. The carpet is rose color. The furniture is a large easy-chair with cushions, right center; to right of this a small library table, with writing materials, Christmas stamps, etc.; a doll's trunk, a couple of dolls; right of table, a desk chair; left of Carol's chair, a small table on which are flowers and a large basket of fruit.*

When curtain lifts there is no one on stage. The cushions in the large chair, left, are still dented as with the imprint of Carol's body; her sewing is on a small dolls' trunk in front of the chair. A large bright-colored

Oriental silk handkerchief hangs in the bay window, arranged as for a signal.

Clem Ruggles appears at the window back, center; taps softly; waits; slowly lifts the window and steps over the ledge. He is a lively little chap and is grinning somewhat impishly. As he stands half in and half out, Elfrida enters door right, back, slowly closing door softly after her.

CLEM. (*Whistles softly, laughs at Elfrida's surprise.*)
Where's Carol?

ELFRIDA. Why, Clem Ruggles! (*Clem smiles at her, then turns to close the window.*) You'll break your neck climbing around like this. (*Comes down center.*)

CLEM. That ain't no climb! (*Looks out of the window, points.*) I just walk along our fence to the coach-house roof, then I catch a holt o' that creepin' ivy vine (*shows how he climbs hand over hand*), and I'm right underneath Carol's piazzer. Any kid could do that. Where is she?

ELFRIDA. Where is your hat, Mr. Clement Ruggles? — since you're calling on a lady? (*Clem snatches off his hat.*) Carol is asleep. (*Nods to door, right back, straightens cushions in chair, left.*)

CLEM. (*Whispers.*) Cracky, I hope I ain't waked her! (*Ambles down stage on his tiptoes.*) She ain't sick, is she?

ELFRIDA. No. But she's been working very hard (*indicates table and work on chair*) getting ready for Christmas.

CLEM. (*Walks around table, fingering things curiously.*) Nice, ain't it? (*Goes to chair, right, occupied by*

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dolls, eyes them, starts to sit down, then leans against chair instead.) She's great on making presents, ain't she? Funny, ain't none of us like that, and we've had seven chances.

ELFRIDA. What do you mean?

CLEM. Well, they's seven of us, and seems as though some of us might 'a' ben borned on Christmas same's Carol. (*Talks fast.*) But Ma says we ain't none o' us 'xactly what you might call Christmas-like, though Kitty's kind o' handsome. (*Reaches over suddenly and grabs up one of the dolls, teasingly, by the foot and lets it dangle.*)

ELFRIDA. Clem!

CLEM. (*Grins, replaces doll.*) It did n't even get red in the face.

ELFRIDA. Did you want to see Carol about anything special?

CLEM. She told me to come (*points to handkerchief in window*) quick as ever I see that in the winder.

ELFRIDA. Oh! do you know what for?

CLEM. Well — I ain't sure, but 't was something about Christmas (*eagerly*) — something 'bout a letter (*begins fingering letters on table*) — maybe it's here.

ELFRIDA. (*Takes up several letters just as he reaches for them.*) She's written a good many to-day — but I'm not sure they're ready to go.

CLEM. I'll wait and see. (*Shoves doll to one side in chair.*) Sit along there, you! (*Squeezes into chair beside doll, takes one up and dances it on his knee.*)

ELFRIDA. (*Hands him book.*) Would you like to look at this?

CLEM. Thank yer. (*Springs up suddenly, doll and book rattling to the floor.*) Cracky, I forgot, I can't wait. I'm busy, got a job running errands for the drug-store man round the corner; he's promised me fifty cents a week —

ELFRIDA. (*Having righted the dolls, picks up large square letter, hesitates.*) Perhaps Carol meant — or, no, you'd better come over later.

CLEM. I can't. Maybe I can git Sarah Maud to, but she's awful bashful about coming here to the big house. She thinks 'cause we live in the back alley we had n't ought to make free. Ma says she ain't got no American spirit at all. Bet yer life I have! I ain't scared o' nobody. (*Comes up beside Elfrida, smiles up at her, and his hand goes up slowly, petitioningly to the letter.*) Say, can't you give it to me now?

ELFRIDA. (*Smiles down at him, lowers her hand a little; his fingers almost clutch the letter. Mrs. Bird enters right, front.*) Here's Carol's mother — we'll ask her. You know Clem, Mrs. Bird? — Clem Ruggles?

MRS. BIRD. (*Crosses to center, hand held out.*) Of course I know Clem. (*Clem is uncertain which hand to give, shifts from foot to foot.*) How are you and the other children — and your mother?

CLEM (*choking*). I dunno! Same as they was, I guess.

ELFRIDA. He's come for a letter Carol told him to get (*with meaning*) — I thought it might be this one. (*Hands large square one to Mrs. Bird. Mrs. Bird looks at address, then takes out card, reads.*)

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CLEM. She said 't was a invitation or something I was to "deliver" for her. (*Pause.*)

MRS. BIRD. (*Walks up stage, then back.*) No — we're not sure yet, that this is to go. (*Puts it down on table, sees other one, picks it up.*)

ELFRIDA. That's the letter to the organist at the church asking him to play Carol's song on Christmas evening.

MRS. BIRD. This must be the one, then, she wants you to take for her if you will, please? (*Holds it out.*)

CLEM (*without seeing the letter*). Y-e-s, but —

MRS. BIRD. I think you'll find the organist in the church practicing.

CLEM. She said something 'bout a party or — or —

MRS. BIRD. A Christmas celebration — (*Clem nods.*) This is it — she's asking the organist to help her celebrate her birthday by having his choir sing "Carol, Brothers, Carol." That is the song that made me name her Carol; — did n't she ever tell you about that? But if you have n't time —

CLEM. (*Takes the letter.*) 'Course I'll take it.

(*Mrs. Bird hands him some money. He takes it, looks at it, starts to hand it back, then slowly puts it in his pocket, turns to go out window.*)

ELFRIDA (*at the door*). This way, please, Clem. (*He hesitates, smiles broadly, and exits by the door.*) Funny little fellow — but so good to his brothers and sisters — and the brightest one of the seven.

MRS. BIRD (*looking at the large envelope*). Do you

think Carol has set her heart on having them here for Christmas dinner?

ELFRIDA (*crossing to table*). She's full of plans for it.

MRS. BIRD. I was afraid so.

ELFRIDA (*hesitatingly*). Don't you like the idea?

MRS. BIRD. Yes, I do — but — do you think she is strong enough to have so many children here —

ELFRIDA. I'm sure it would do her a lot of good. I wonder if we quite realize how much she enjoys those children! She sits up here in her window by the hour watching them at play down there (*Mrs. Bird walks up stage to the window*) in their bit of yard, and has just as much fun as though she were romping with them. They're her proxies, as it were. (*Pause.*) I must say I'm growing fond of the Ruggleses too.

MRS. BIRD. I believe I am, myself. (*Walks down stage.*) I suppose it is because they are so hearty and full of life. They have nothing and Carol almost everything, yet we cannot give her the one thing lacking.

ELFRIDA. She has never been anything but contented, but she has certainly been brighter and happier since this friendship with the Ruggles children began.

MRS. BIRD. Men are n't so democratic as women, Elfrida, and Carol's father is n't wholly pleased at her interest in them. If I ask him about the dinner, I'm sure he'll say no, and Carol will be disappointed. If I don't ask him and do let her have them here, *his* Christmas will be spoiled!

ELFRIDA. Why not let Carol ask him herself?

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MRS. BIRD. You think he won't be able to say no to her?

ELFRIDA. I think he'd realize, perhaps, how fond she is of the Ruggleses.

MRS. BIRD. Yes — maybe. (*Puts invitation back on table.*) Oh, Elfrida, do you happen to remember where we put that tall silver vase, the one Carol calls Uncle Jack's? I want to put the flowers in his room before he arrives.

ELFRIDA. Has he come already?

MRS. BIRD. He has just telephoned from the dock.

ELFRIDA. Carol will be delighted. You were n't expecting him until this evening, were you?

MRS. BIRD. No, and don't tell her that he's here, please. He wants to surprise her and he can't come to the house at once, he — Elfrida, did you ever hear of a Dr. Voss?

ELFRIDA. Dr. Voss, yes, let me see — why, you don't mean Dr. Robert Voss, of Berlin! The children's specialist?

MRS. BIRD (*nodding*). He's a miracle-worker! So Jack says.

ELFRIDA. Are you thinking of taking Carol to Germany?

MRS. BIRD. No, he's in this country. Jack has brought him home with him.

ELFRIDA. How splendid!

MRS. BIRD. I'm not sure that I think so. (*Pause.*) I don't want Carol to hope — and be disappointed again. I shan't force her to see him if she does n't feel inclined.

ELFRIDA. Could n't you let him come without letting Carol know why?

MRS. BIRD. No; she'd suspect at once; she has an uncanny way of understanding us all better than we do ourselves. I've told her uncle that he must ask her and arrange the matter himself.

ELFRIDA. But if the doctor's come so far —

MRS. BIRD. (*Crosses to door.*) I know, but I'm thinking of the child. Where did you say the vase is?

ELFRIDA. Oh, it's in Mr. Bird's room, with the flowers in it. Carol arranged them.

MRS. BIRD. And I thought she'd forgotten! I'll take a look and see that all is right.

(*Exit Mrs. Bird.*)

(*Elfrida is busy at the table.*)

(*Sound of a small xylophone is heard.*)

(*Elfrida listens, the scale is sounded again, quickly.*)

(*Elfrida crosses to door, right, back, and leaves it open as she hurries into the room beyond.*)

CAROL. (*Voice laughing and teasing.*) If you please, Mistress Elf-rida (*Carol always breaks the name when she is happy or mischievous*), do say the time's up! Need I make-believe sleep any longer?

ELFRIDA. Do you feel rested?

CAROL. Rested! how can I when I was n't tired? Oh, Elfrida, please let me walk alone. You and mother don't realize, I think, that I'm growing up.

CAROL. (*Appears in door, center, leaning on crutch, Elfrida following.*) Has anybody been here? (*Walks slowly to chair, left of table.*)

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ELFRIDA. Clem Ruggles.

CAROL. Oh, has he! My signal worked beautifully, did n't it? Did you give him the invitation? (*Walks to the table, sees it, picks it up.*) You did n't. Oh, why not? Was n't he disappointed?

ELFRIDA (*placing rug in chair*). I did n't know whether the dinner was quite settled —

CAROL (*sitting in chair as Elfrida tucks her in*). Why, of course, it's settled.

ELFRIDA. Have you asked your father about it?

CAROL. Daddy? He won't mind.

ELFRIDA. The Ruggleses are n't exactly — favorites with your father.

CAROL. Will you hand me Kitty's doll, please. I've got an idea for her dress. (*Elfrida hands her doll and cloth, etc. Sewing.*) I'm sure Daddy wants everybody to be happy.

ELFRIDA. Wanting people to be happy is quite different from inviting them to your house. The Ruggleses are not exactly — eligible dinner guests.

CAROL. What is "eligible"? They're hungry!

ELFRIDA. (*Sits right of table, business of sewing for doll.*) Asking seven children to dinner is n't simple. Who will keep them amused?

CAROL (*counting on her fingers*). Mother (*pulls back thumb*) and you (*first finger*) and Uncle Jack. (*Flips her right hand across all the fingers of her left hand.*) Why, Uncle Jack could keep a million children amused.

ELFRIDA. Is there anything that Uncle Jack can't do?

CAROL. Nothing. He's just perfect, you'll think so, too. Wait until you've seen him.

ELFRIDA. I've never known a perfect man, but —

CAROL. You will soon. (*Takes letter from pocket — a thick one with foreign stamps.*) I've a great mind to make you hear his letter over again. That would only be three times! (*Slips to edge of her chair.*) He's likely to come any minute now. (*Laughs.*) Oh, I'm so happy (*moves forward as though to stand*) — if I could dance I'd — Dance for me, Elfrida, please; that's a darling!

ELFRIDA. Dance, dear?

CAROL. Yes. (*Insistently.*)

(*Elfrida rises uncertainly, then gives a few graceful steps, smiling at Carol, who grows more and more impatient.*)

CAROL. No, no, no! Faster. Whirl and whirl and whirl! (*Jumps to her feet, starts to whirl, fails; stands quietly, smiles at Elfrida.*) My heart's dancing, that'll be enough. (*Walks thoughtfully back to chair, left, and sits down, resuming her sewing. Elfrida walks up stage to window. Carol leans over, opens small trunk beside her chair, takes out doll clothes and tries them on the doll.*) Elfrida, what would you like most for Christmas?

ELFRIDA. What would I like most, dear? (*Walks down stage and stands by Carol's chair, looks down at her longingly.*) I'd like a miracle.

CAROL. A miracle (*looks up at her*) — what's that?

ELFRIDA (*crossing to right*). You can't find them at

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any of the shops, dear, nowadays, they're out of date. People don't believe in them, any more.

CAROL (*puzzled*). Oh! well, then, what else would you like?

ELFRIDA. (*Comes to Carol's chair; takes up a doll and looks at it.*) Besides the miracle? Well, one thing more, perhaps, but I'm afraid you could n't get it in a stocking.

CAROL (*eagerly*). What is it?

ELFRIDA (*reflectively; not looking at Carol, but absent-mindedly voicing her thoughts*). I am very well contented, but if I really long for anything I believe it's — a home!

CAROL (*in surprise*). Why, Elfrida! You've lived with us a whole year! The Bird's Nest is your home.

ELFRIDA. (*Walks center; sits by table.*) Yes, of course; and a very lovely one it is, too, — but there's another kind.

CAROL. You mean (*softly*) where there's your very own father and mother?

ELFRIDA. Yes, dear.

CAROL. Oh! and you have n't any! (*After a troubled pause.*) But there's another kind, too, Elfrida.

ELFRIDA. Yes?

CAROL. You know, when Daddy and Mother built this home, there was n't any father or mother in it: and then, after a while, they just *were* the father and mother.

ELFRIDA (*amused*). Very true.

CAROL (*holding up doll and trying on hat*). Shall you ever be married, Elfrida?

ELFRIDA. How should I know? I never think about it.

CAROL (*severely*). If you *don't* think about it, perhaps you *won't* be!

ELFRIDA. Perhaps the Fairy Prince will think of it first, and put the idea into my head.

CAROL. There seem to be so few Princes, now-a-days, that (*stops; smiles*) — Does it make any difference who has the idea first — the Prince or the Princess?

ELFRIDA (*laughingly*). They say it makes a *great* difference.

CAROL. I think that's silly. If two people are going to be married, I don't see why one of them has n't just as much to say about it as the other. — Could another person — have the idea, first?

ELFRIDA. I dare say. (*Pause.*) But why are you thinking about marriage to-day, Carol?

CAROL. Father wants Uncle Jack to be married. We all hate to have him off in India, shooting. Mother has found some lovely young ladies for him. One was *so* pretty! and one gave me my biggest doll. (*Elfrida laughs.*) And one used to come and sing to me. Uncle Jack did n't like her voice. He told mother *she'd* never make a Bird! Mother could n't help laughing; but she scolded Uncle Jack. You see, he stays such a little while that nothing ever happens. (*Sighs.*) I could n't help thinking how nice — *you'd* be, Elfrida!

ELFRIDA (*sitting erect*). My dear Carol! You **must** n't plan these things for other people.

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CAROL. Father says somebody will have to plan for Uncle Jack because he'll never stop to think about it himself (*sighs*): and if you're going to be the same kind, nothing ever will happen! I would n't speak about it, of course, if you don't want me to (*more brightly*), but I might tell him to notice how pretty you look in your new fur turban, might n't I?

ELFRIDA (*turning to center*). Certainly not.

CAROL. I don't see how that would make you uncomfortable. Listen! (*Elfrida turns toward door.*) Maybe that's Uncle Jack now! (*Rises and crosses stage, right. Door opens.*) O Daddy! I thought you were Uncle Jack.

MR. BIRD. (*Closes door, carefully; then goes to Carol and takes her hand. They walk center stage. His speech is laconic, and he has an air of aristocratic self-satisfaction, but he is a typically affectionate father.*) Disappointed that I'm not?

CAROL (*swinging his hands*). Of course not: though I did hope it was Uncle Jack, because — we'd been talking about him. (*A teasing glance at Elfrida. Mr. Bird scans Elfrida.*)

ELFRIDA (*embarrassed by Mr. Bird's look*). Shall I put the table away, Carol?

CAROL. Yes, please. (*Elfrida pushes the table back, center, and is busy sorting and putting away the letters, papers, etc.*)

MR. BIRD (*with a short wave of the hand toward the table*). Christmas?

CAROL (*laughing*). Yes. Do sit down, Daddy. (*Pushes him into chair and climbs into his lap.*) I

can't talk to you when your face is so far from mine. (*Snuggles her face to his; he pats her on shoulder, awkwardly.*) You see (*slowly*), Daddy, Christmas is only a week away, and —

MR. BIRD (*taking out his bill-case and smiling as he opens it*). How much do you need?

CAROL. It is n't money.

ELFRIDA (*from the window*). The children have come home from school, Carol.

(*Carol slips from her father's knee and goes quickly to the window; opens it; waves both her hands. There is a shout of "Hello, Carol." Mr. Bird straightens and frowns.*)

CAROL. Oh, Daddy, do come and see the funny dears!

MR. BIRD (*grimly*). Thank you, I'd rather not. (*Pause.*) And I wish you would n't —

(*Carol turns from window, which is left open.*)

CAROL. Would n't what, Father?

MR. BIRD. Would n't encourage those noisy —

CAROL. (*Comes down stage; stands between father and window.*) They're never noisy (*a loud, long howl. Elfrida closes window quickly. Mr. Bird frowns*) — or almost never.

MR. BIRD. Perhaps — not (*grimly*); but they're a nuisance.'

CAROL. (*Comes slowly forward, puzzled by her father's manner. She puts left hand on his shoulder and perches on the arm of chair.*) They always look up here and ask before they begin to play: don't they, Elfrida?

ELFRIDA (*from the window*). Yes, Mr. Bird; they are really very careful. If I shake my head "no," that means Carol has a headache, and they play a game Sarah Maud invented and calls the "Deaf and Dumb School."

MR. BIRD (*grudgingly*). That is rather nice of them.

CAROL. You'd like them if you once knew them, Daddy. That's one reason I want them to come to dinner, Christmas, so —

MR. BIRD. (*Rises.*) To dinner, Christmas, those alley neighbors?

(*Elfrida exits.*)

CAROL (*coming down stage eagerly*). Yes, won't it be fun? You called them neighbors yourself, even if they do live in the alley.

MR. BIRD. Not — all those Ruggleses?

CAROL. Of course, all of them. (*Picks up square envelope.*) I say particularly (*reads*): "Sarah Maud, Peter, Peoria, Kitty, Clem, Cornelius, and Larry."

MR. BIRD. You have n't invited them — yet?

CAROL. No-o—

MR. BIRD. Then don't.

CAROL. Don't? Why, Daddy?

MR. BIRD. Because — because — (*crosses to left, abruptly*) — because — well, Christmas is your birthday and belongs to the family.

CAROL. (*Slight pause, then, slowly.*) Christmas is Christ's birthday too; would n't that make it belong to *his* family?

MR. BIRD (*with resignation*). I suppose so.

CAROL. (*Crosses to her father, plays with buttons on*

his coat.) His family — is all the families — everywhere, is n't it?

MR. BIRD. (*Turns away uncomfortably.*) In a way, yes. (*Quickly.*) I don't mean, Carol, that you're not to send them something—send them a dinner in a basket.

CAROL (*coaxingly*). A basket is n't Christmasy — I want them to have a real Christmas, this year, Daddy. Their father is away, and — mine is right here, close to me, — *please!*

MR. BIRD. (*Hesitates. There's a howl outside. He stiffens.*) No, no, Carol, it won't do. (*Quickly.*) But I'll buy you anything you want —

CAROL. You can't buy what I want.

(*Mr. Bird steps to her quickly, puts his hand out toward her.*)

MR. BIRD. You mean —

CAROL. (*Stands before table.*) I only mean, Daddy, that I want to share Christmas with the Ruggleses — and buying and sending is n't sharing.

MR. BIRD. Well — I — (*Enter Mrs. Bird. Eagerly.*) Here's mother. I'll talk it over with her.

CAROL (*shaking her head at her father and laughing at him*). Oh, if mother is to be the umpire, it's my game!

MRS. BIRD. (*Stands right of Carol, holding her hand.*) Carol! You've been hearing your brothers talk baseball.

MR. BIRD. Remember, little girl, I did n't say I'd leave it to mother. I merely said —

CAROL. Mother, Daddy thinks the Ruggleses don't belong to a family party.

MRS. BIRD. Need we discuss this now, Donald?

MR. BIRD. It becomes a simple question of whether the rear family is to be given a slight pleasure at the expense of my great *displeasure*. It's the Ruggleses or me.

MRS. BIRD. Donald, please! (*Shakes her head at him and with a nod indicates Carol's disappointment.*)

CAROL. Of course, Daddy, if you make us *choose*, but why do you put it that way?

MRS. BIRD (*cheerily*). He does n't put it that way, dear. And if he did, perhaps seven little Ruggleses tumbled into the scale on one side could outweigh even Daddy, big as he is. But that is n't the question at all, the question is — are n't you forgetting about dressing for Uncle Jack? Was n't it *part* of the great welcome to be wearing the gown he sent you from China, last Christmas?

CAROL. Oh, yes, yes! (*Her fingers tremble with excitement as she begins to unfasten her dress, turning toward the door.*) Is Uncle Jack coming now?

MR. BIRD (*continuing the argument*). I suppose the Ruggles woman has a good heart; but she gets on my nerves, she's so active and bustling. I don't believe she ever sleeps or stops talking or rolls down her sleeves. She's worse than the children. And now, this dinner idea!

MRS. BIRD. You don't want it, then?

MR. BIRD (*fussily*). I certainly do *not*! I'd be willing to send a turkey or a ham over there once a week, — anything but see them eat it!

MRS. BIRD. And Carol *wants* to "see them eat it."

Remember Donald, dear, there may not be — so many Christmases — for her.

MR. BIRD. (*Looks at her, troubled; steps to her; puts his hand on her shoulder, tenderly.*) Don't you suppose I'm thinking of the child, too, Mary? But I don't like these intimacies with rear houses.

MRS. BIRD. The world will never be wiser or happier till the front houses and the rear houses know each other better.

MR. BIRD. Very pretty, but not practical, my dear Mary. . . . I sometimes think I'll buy the property and build a conservatory there. It will be a pleasant way of getting rid of all the clutter, besides giving Carol something beautiful to look at.

MRS. BIRD. A conservatory in place of the Rug-gleses! O Donald, you *are* so amusing!

MR. BIRD. I don't see it. Any person of taste would prefer flowers to —

MRS. BIRD. Children, Donald?

MR. BIRD. Er — ah — well, not exactly to children, of course, that is if they are clean and well dressed.

MRS. BIRD. That is n't it. Carol needs just what these strong, healthy —

MR. BIRD. You might as well say that a lawn needs dandelions. I'm not sure but that they ought to be taken out roots and all — these dandelions.

MRS. BIRD. Please, Donald; not at Christmas time! You could n't be so cruel.

MR. BIRD. I should n't put salt on their roots. I'd see that they were planted in another place — a long way from here.

MRS. BIRD. In the mean time shall we say "yes" to the dinner?

MR. BIRD. Do as you like; and if they continue to keep their place, well and good, but if they don't, I'll uproot them — and plant roses. (*The door, right, opens stealthily. Sarah Maud and Larry enter timidly; they come to center. Mr. Bird watches their approach with amazement.*) Here they are, the dandelions!

MRS. BIRD. (*Turns in surprise and stands looking at Sarah Maud, whose eyes do not meet hers, and at Larry, who stares wonderingly in return.*) It's Sarah Maud and Larry.

MR. BIRD. (*Crosses to window, left; speaks with impatience.*) They'd smell the same by any other name: but at any rate, they're here!

(*Mrs. Bird crosses to right of Larry and Sarah Maud, and begins to unwrap Larry. Mr. Bird turns and watches the performance with evident displeasure. Larry clings tightly to Sarah Maud's hand, watching her out of the corners of his eyes. He is a mass of clothing, the distinguishing features being a knitted red comforter at least two yards long wound around his person from chin to waist, underneath which is a tight woolen sweater. He wears a knitted cap. As Mrs. Bird unwraps the comforter, Larry turns clumsily, and threatens a tumble each time. Sarah Maud stands by, too terrorized to speak. Mr. Bird puffs out his cheeks and presses his lips together as he watches Mrs. Bird unwind Larry and lift his cap from his head. Larry's hair stands stiffly erect when released, and*

a smile spreads itself over his chubby face. Mrs. Bird takes hold of bottom of sweater, and Larry lifts his pudgy arms. The sweater is quickly lifted, and Sarah Maud steps forward in timid protest as a patched and darned undershirt is revealed. Mrs. Bird quickly lowers the sweater; then rises from her knees. Larry moves slowly toward Carol's chair.)

SARAH MAUD (*finding a voice*). We can't stop more'n a minute, 'cause — 'cause it's so late.

(Mr. Bird turns; sees Larry climbing into Carol's chair and waves his hand at him warningly. Larry looks at him in amazement, leaves chair and slowly backs up stage to window. Mr. Bird turns away and watches Sarah Maud. Larry stands before the window; sees the handkerchief; tries to reach it; cannot; drags a three-legged stool to the window.)

MR. BIRD. Did Carol send for you to come this afternoon?

(Larry climbs on to stool.)

SARAH MAUD (*slowly*). No, m'm — er — sir; she did n't send — *(Mr. Bird nods to Mrs. Bird in a "you see" manner. Larry reaches up for the handkerchief.)* Clem thought (*stammeringly*) — Clem thought — maybe — you see —

(Larry tumbles from stool, and the crash interrupts the conversation. Sarah Maud hurries to pick him up. As she stands Larry on his feet again, he gasps but clings to the handkerchief, and is about to cry. He looks up and sees Mrs. Bird

holding out a bit of fruit to him; he smiles expansively; steps forward; takes the fruit and sits serenely upon the stool which Sarah Maud has righted and placed slightly down stage, center. Sarah Maud stands right, Mrs. Bird left, Mr. Bird left front.)

MR. BIRD (*looking at Larry, closely*). What is that he's picked up?

SARAH MAUD (*trembling*). I — don't know, sir; it — (*Goes to Larry and with some difficulty opens his hand; takes out the handkerchief and holds it up.*)

MR. BIRD. Why, it's that Japanese silk thing Jack sent me. Upon my word! (*Gesture of "That settles it!" with both hands.*)

MRS. BIRD. He's such a little fellow, Don.

MR. BIRD. (*Frowns and walks to door, right.*) Perhaps now you will acknowledge that I was right, Mary.

(Mr. Bird stops at door, looks at Mrs. Bird, then hurries out and the door slams after him. Mrs. Bird is right front. Larry sits on the stool, contentedly gnawing his fruit. Sarah Maud stands beside him, suffering great embarrassment. Not understanding the handkerchief episode, she studies it carefully, folds it into a small square, tiptoes down stage, and puts it in Carol's chair. Mrs. Bird stands by the chair.)

SARAH MAUD (*apologetically*). He did n't mean no harm, Larry did n't, Mrs. Bird. He — he — allus likes bright things, and —

MRS. BIRD. Sit down, Sarah Maud; I want to talk to you. (*Sarah Maud drops into a chair, right. Mrs. Bird sits, left, in Carol's chair. Larry is center, up stage, and always in sight, always munching, his eyes beatific.*) Carol tells me you have lived in a great many places.

SARAH MAUD. Yessum.

MRS. BIRD. And find it easy to make a home in a new place, I suppose?

SARAH MAUD (*blankly*). Yessum.

MRS. BIRD. We were thinking we might help you to find a more comfortable house than the one you have now.

(*Pause. Sarah Maud, who has been tying knot in her dress, looks up and finds Mrs. Bird watching her.*)

SARAH MAUD (*dully*). Yessum.

MRS. BIRD (*planning*). For instance — a cozy little house with a garden and a place where you could keep chickens would be nice, would n't it? (*Pause.*)

SARAH MAUD. (*Straightens slightly.*) Yessum, though we ain't no egg eaters.

MRS. BIRD. Your mother would like a place where — (*Sarah Maud looks at her*) — the children would have more room to play? Would n't she?

SARAH MAUD. (*Sits very erect; speaks now very slowly, and her "Yes" means "no."*) Yessum.

MRS. BIRD. You would find it so much more comfortable than living in the rear. (*With a look toward the window. Sarah Maud watches her with much trouble. Pause.*)

SARAH MAUD (*nervously*). Y-e-s. (*Pause, then courageously.*) No. (*Pause.*) There ain't no other place so good as our'n. (*Sits again, slowly.*)

MRS. BIRD. (*Leans her elbow on the arm of chair.*) Then you — like to live (*pause*) — here!

SARAH MAUD (*eagerly*). There's allus a lot goin' on in the back o' this house, an' it's Carol makes us like it. It's the winder-school in summer time; us on the coach-house roof and her up in the winder — an' lots o' things like that; an' Ma says her light, up here, is company for her when she's mendin', nights.

(*Pause; Mrs. Bird sighs. Sarah Maud sidles to very edge of chair, nervously.*)

SARAH MAUD. I — guess I'd better be a-goin'.

MRS. BIRD. (*Rises.*) Won't you wait for Carol? She's getting ready for her Uncle Jack who's coming from India. She has n't seen him for three years and it's a great event. (*Sarah Maud rises quickly.*)

SARAH MAUD. No'm, I must n't wait. (*Hurries to door, right.*)

MRS. BIRD (*following behind, calls after her kindly*). I'll tell Carol you were here. (*Opens door; Sarah Maud rushes out; Mrs. Bird follows.*)

(*When the door is held open, there is the sound of a clanging house door, of a carriage leaving, a murmur of voices in greeting; not too loud, as Carol is supposed not to hear them. As the door closes, Larry looks up, starts to rise, settles back and finishes eating his fruit. Voices outside, and a happy laugh by Uncle Jack.*)

UNCLE JACK. (*Outside. A loud, clear, genial tone.*) No; don't come up. I don't want any gooseberries at this interview. Keep out of the way, Donald. (*Larry rises slowly; wrinkles up his face preparatory to weeping; looks about; gasps; discovers the fruit plate. His hand is almost touching it, when the door, right, opens and Uncle Jack enters. Larry hesitates; listens; then a broad smile appears on his face. He then turns slowly and faces Uncle Jack, who stands watching the performance with amusement. As Larry turns, Jack comes forward, and the two stand, center stage, looking at each other.*) Well, well! (*Holds out his hand.*) How do you do, sir? (*Larry studies the hand; retreats a step; then slowly moves the hand which holds the banana until it is quite out of danger. Jack laughs.*) You'd rather not shake? I don't know but that you're right. How can you tell that I'm not a banana-snatcher? I say, — would you mind telling me who you are? (*Pause.*) Of course, it is a bit stupid of me not to know, but — do you happen to be any kind of a Bird— near relative, or adopted?

LARRY (*full-throatedly*). I'm — a — boy.

JACK. (*Laughs.*) Indeed? I might almost have guessed it. You see, kiddie, I'm Uncle Jack. Do you happen to live here? — or are you just about collecting fruit?

LARRY. Her guv me one. (*Holds the banana out to Jack.*)

JACK. (*Takes the fruit; examines it, watching Larry out of the corners of his eyes.*) Oh, did she? (*Larry nods and looks anxious.*) Then I'm quite sure she

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would like you to have this one also. (*Hands another banana to Larry, who takes it, smiles, and walks back to his stool and sits there, eating. Jack laughs aloud.*)

By George, you're perfect!

(*Carol stands in door, right, back.*)

CAROL. Uncle Jack! Uncle Jack!! Uncle Jack — O—h!!

JACK. (*Turns quickly; leaps to Carol; takes her in his arms in a great hungry hug.*) My little Carol! (*Holds her off and studies her.*) How you've (*his voice catches*) — grown!

CAROL. (*Laughs happily; takes him by the hand and leads him down stage.*) Why did n't they tell me? Oh! you look just the same, dearest, dearest Uncle Jack! When did you come?

JACK. (*When she is not looking his face is sad; but he smiles at her.*) This very minute. I came first to you. (*Holds her off, inspecting her.*) Why, you're wearing my dressing-gown! You might be the Empress of China!

LARRY. (*Comes down stage to Carol; pulls her dress to attract her attention.*) Home!

CAROL. (*To Jack.*) Why, there's Larry Ruggles!

LARRY. Home!

CAROL. Please call Elfrida, Uncle Jack.

JACK. The house bristles with strangers — Who is Elfrida? Another Ruggles?

CAROL (*reproachfully*). You know; Elfrida, who takes care of me. She's in my room. (*Points to door, right back.*)

JACK. Of course — Elfrida, the nurse. Kind,

faithful, fat, comfortable Elfrida! (*Steps to door; opens it; calls jauntily.*) Elfrida, Elfrida!

(*Elfrida appears in the door and smiles at Jack, who stops, confused and apologetic.*)

ELFRIDA (*laughing*). You — called me?

JACK. Did I? Er — yes, of course; Miss — er — Carol wants you.

(*Elfrida crosses to Carol. Jack stands in doorway, watching her, stroking his chin reflectively.*)

CAROL. Larry wants to go home, Elfrida. Will you do him up, please, and take him?

ELFRIDA. Come, Larry. Where are —

JACK (*stepping forward quickly and gathering up the shawl and cap from a chair*). The wrappings? Is this some of it? (*Hands comforter to Elfrida, who takes it, kneels before Larry, and begins.*)

CAROL. Oh! Elfrida, I forgot! this is Uncle Jack.

ELFRIDA (*kneeling before Larry and winding carefully, looks up and nods*). How do you do, Unc— Mr. Bird?

JACK. (*Laughs.*) May I — assist — with that? (*Kneels on other side of Larry and hinders with the process by holding to the shawl.*) I've the idea! You hold the shawl tight, and I'll manipulate the boy — this way. (*Gives Elfrida end of shawl; then slowly twirls Larry, who revolves gravely. Carol stands center, just back of Larry. Jack is right; Elfrida left. Larry is finally swathed. Jack rises.*) There! I call that a good job, don't you?

CAROL (*laughing*). O Uncle Jack!

JACK. This is the first golf ball I ever wound; but I understand now why they are so expensive.

ELFRIDA. (*Slowly crowds on Larry's cap; rises; takes his hand; then looks at Jack.*) Because there are so many layers?

(*Larry is looking longingly toward the fruit basket. Jack steps quickly to it, takes up a pear and hands it to Larry.*)

JACK. There, old man — with my compliments.

(*Larry's little fist closes over it delightedly.*)

ELFRIDA. What do you say, Larry?

LARRY (*decisively*). Home!

ELFRIDA. Come, then; we'll go. (*Leads him out.*)

(*Jack holds door open. Carol stands, center, watching them off.*)

JACK. (*Walks to center of stage.*) She's a very pretty person — Elfrida; not at all like a "caretaker."

CAROL (*delighted*). Yes, is n't she? And she is awfully good to me, Uncle Jack.

JACK (*taking her hand*). Is she, indeed! (*Laughs.*) Well, that's no virtue. Now, can't we sit down and settle a few of the world's great problems?

CAROL. (*Laughs at him.*) Let's!

(*They cross to left to large chair that is wide enough for both, and sit.*)

JACK. Here we are together again! Is n't it jolly? Who is the sweetest Christmas Carol that was ever sung?

CAROL (*promptly and laughingly*). I am! Oh, Uncle Jack, are you going to stay at home this time? Father hopes so.

JACK (*pinching her cheek*). Father does n't understand a rolling stone, — and several other things. (*Pause.*)

CAROL. He does n't understand why I want the Ruggleses here to dinner Christmas.

JACK. Ruggleses? The tribe of Larry? (*Laughs, points toward door.*)

CAROL. Larry's brothers and sisters. They're awfully nice children.

JACK. Awfully nice, eh? (*Hums.*) "And they live in our alley." (*Whistles or sings a bit of "Sally in Our Alley."*)

"She is the darling of my heart
And she lives in our alley."

CAROL. Oh, do it again! You do make everything so lovely and happy and Christmasy, Uncle Jack!

JACK. Thanks. But your father, dear, could n't have seen the charm even of my Sally, and as for your Larry — and his brothers and his sisters and his cousins and his aunts, I can't imagine him speaking to them even through a telephone.

CAROL. (*With a sigh.*) Oh, dear. I wanted them to have at least one good Christmas and —

JACK. By George, so they shall if your mind is set upon it. Who but a Christmas child should decree what's to be done on Christmas Day?

CAROL. But if Daddy —

JACK. I'll fix it up with Daddy. All that ails him is he thinks it is n't quite what would be expected of a family in our position. The Ruggleses, he would say, are not socially our equals.

CAROL (*puzzled*). You mean they don't live in a house as large as ours?

JACK. Well, not exactly, but they don't hold their forks in the same way that we do.

CAROL. I'm sure Daddy does n't care about that.

JACK. Perhaps he does n't really care about it; but it's built into him, because he was born in a large house, where there was only a small family.

CAROL. So were you.

JACK. Yes (*laughs*), but I did n't belong there; Daddy did.

CAROL. Where *did* you belong?

JACK (*tweaking her ear*). I don't know, dear, but I think I should have been dropped into a gypsy camp. I'm a rover; a ship that comes into port, but never stays long, because no anchor ever holds against the call of the sea.

CAROL (*longingly*). It must be wonderful — the sea.

JACK. It is. I'll take you with me some day when you're stronger.

CAROL. Don't you like to travel alone?

JACK. Pleasant trips are pleasanter trips shared with pleasant people. (*Laughs and tweaks her curls.*)

CAROL (*joyfully*). Then why don't you get married, Uncle Jack? And you'd always have somebody to —

JACK. Choose my route for me. No, dear; it won't work. You must grow up, get well and strong, and sail about the world with me. (*Kisses her hands.*) That's what I'm living for — that trip of ours.

CAROL. Are n't you ever lonesome?

(Dusk begins to creep gradually into the room.)

JACK. Never! The world is so full of delightful people that, if he's winging about, even a duffer like your old Nunky gets a word with the worth-while folks now and then. There was a man on the boat this trip, a wonderful chap; *(rises)* sometimes I think he's the greatest chap in the world. *(Pauses; turns and looks at Carol.)* I asked him if he'd come to see us.

CAROL. *(Sits erect, full of interest.)* Oh, Uncle Jack! And would he?

JACK. He's a frightfully busy man — Dr. Bob is.

CAROL *(disappointedlly)*. Doctor! Is he a doctor, Uncle Jack?

(Light of the room is slightly lessened, and the street lights shine in through the windows.)

JACK. Why, yes, dear. Don't you like doctors?

CAROL *(slowly)*. Y-e-s; but I've known so many, I'm almost tired of them.

JACK. Dr. Bob is different. If you'd known a million others, he would still be different. *(Rises and steps nervously to right; then he turns and faces Carol.)* He has keen, merry eyes that look at you, through you, and understand. He has a smile that says to everybody, "Cheer up; I've come to help." He has a strong, kind hand, and when he takes yours into it, little thrills of warmth and life and strength run all over you.

(Pause.)

CAROL *(with a sigh)*. Oh, I hope he will come!

36 THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS CAROL [ACT 1

JACK. He will. He has promised that. (*Pause. Steps nearer her chair.*) You see you've something he would like to get. He is a collector, Dr. Bob is.

CAROL. So is Daddy. First he collected butterflies, then postage stamps, and now it's pipes. What does Dr. Bob collect?

JACK. Crutches.

CAROL. *Crutches!* Oh, Uncle Jack, how can he! Of course I like mine; it helps me walk. But a lot of crutches! It hurts me to think of it. (*Pause. Jack sits on arm of her chair and puts his arm about her.*) Mother and I went, the other day, to the Children's Hospital with books and toys, and it was lovely at first, because they were so pleased to see us. Then I noticed the crutches by the beds, and — and — there were so many, Uncle Jack — and limping is *so* slow. Try as hard as you may, the other people are always there first.

JACK. (*Meets her upturned glance; then looks away quickly.*) I know, dear, I know.

(*Pause.*)

CAROL. (*Slides to the edge of chair so that she is almost standing; holds crutch in both hands; speaks softly.*) I wish I could give Dr. Bob this little wooden helper; but even if I could n't do without it, I'd like to see the pile grow and grow, higher and higher; the other children laying their crutches on the heap and then running and dancing away; . . . and the mothers would all be there, looking on — so happy! . . . (*Sigh.*) Would n't it be beautiful to see?

JACK. Yes, Carol, it would be beautiful to see!

CAROL. (*After a pause.*) When will Dr. Bob come, Uncle Jack?

JACK. (*Leans over her.*) Soon, dear.

CAROL. To-morrow?

JACK. Yes, to-morrow.

(*Brief pause. The light has grown dim. Elfrida enters; hesitates at the door. Jack looks up, their eyes meet and hers are held by the trouble in his; she involuntarily steps toward him.*)

CAROL. Is that you, Elfrida?

ELFRIDA. (*Crosses to the other side of Carol's chair, Jack being on one side.*) Yes. Are you all right? I need n't ask, now that you have your Uncle Jack.

CAROL (*happily. Puts out one hand to clasp hers and the other to Jack, as they stand on either side of her chair protectingly.*) Oh! what a beautiful Christmas this is going to be! I'm almost afraid it will melt away, like a rainbow! Shall we hang the Christmas lantern in the window, Elfrida? Isn't it dark enough?

(*Elfrida gets the lantern, a quaint thing of pierced brass and hangs it where the flame will shine out into the night.*)

JACK (*smiling affectionately at Carol's fancies.*) Is it to light the Ruggleses on their next journey across the roof?

CAROL. No, it's to please Mrs. Ruggles. She likes to see it when she's mending the children's clothes in the evening — and, besides — you won't smile if I tell you something Elfrida read in a book, will you, Uncle Jack?

JACK. Never!

CAROL (*softly and looking away from him*). The story says . . . that in the nights just before Christmas . . . the Christ-Child walks through the streets . . . and . . . if we put a light in the window . . . he sees the way better.

(*Elfrida shows that she has heard, and the lantern being lighted and hung she looks at it as if, indeed, it might guide some celestial being through the darkness. Uncle Jack draws Carol to him and kisses her hair.*)

SLOW CURTAIN

ACT II

SOME OTHER BIRDS ARE TAUGHT TO FLY

SCENE: *The kitchen of the "house in the rear."* It is early morning, and the light is still dim even when aided by a kerosene lamp. The walls of the room are of any dull color and the general look of things, though denoting poverty, need not be sordid or untidy.

To the right, front, is a door leading into a woodshed; in the rear wall, center, is a door leading to the alley; to the right and left of this are narrow, four-paned windows partly covered by sash curtains. In the left wall, to the front, is a door leading to a bedroom and the stairs which lead to the upper rooms.

To the right, front, is an iron sink in wooden frame; before it stands a soap box, bottom upwards. A dishpan hangs on the side toward the audience. On the wall, to right of sink, is a cupboard. In line with the sink, to the back, is a small cook stove in which a bright fire is burning and on which are placed a steaming teakettle, an iron pot, and a large tin boiler pushed to the back. Between the stove and the sink, toward center of stage, is a small kitchen table covered by a brown oil cloth and meagerly set with dishes — a large pitcher, bowls and spoons, a bread-board, and a syrup pitcher. There are four stiff wooden chairs about the table. A small unlighted lamp is on the table.

In the left corner, back, is a large screen fashioned of a clotheshorse covered neatly with coarse brown denim

or burlap. Beneath the screen are visible the solid legs of a small wooden bed. The soft sides of the screen bulge, after the opening of the act, with the pressure of small bodies struggling into clothes.

To the front, left, is a low wooden bureau. Over one corner of the looking-glass is hung a heavy chain of sea shells to which is attached an anchor carved from bark. In the wall, to right of this, is a colored crayon atrocity, at least twenty-seven inches square, showing a stout ruddy sailor man — Mr. Ruggles.

Beside the bureau stands the fifth wooden chair.

To left of stove is a small coal hod.

In front of the window, right, back, is a small wood box.

Carol's dinner invitation occupies a prominent place.

When the curtain lifts, Mrs. Ruggles is at the door, left front, which she holds open. Plain, comfortable figure, no eccentricities of dress, bustling, energetic, forcible, but never for a moment a termagant. If her tone is occasionally loud or strident, it is because of hurry and worry and flurry and her overmastering desire to have the children do credit to the family. The audience must feel that, although she is no special ornament to society, she is a faithful mother, according to her lights. Sarah Maud is setting a pitcher of milk on the table, then gets bread out of cupboard.

Peter enters from the woodshed (door, right front) with an armful of wood which he lets fall into the wood box with a clatter.

MRS. RUGGLES (calling). Sakes alive! It's Christmas Day! Only ten hours between this and the din-

ner-party and you're sleepin' up there as though you had n't never had no invitation! Come, I say, hurry down here an' git your breakfast There's plenty to do, for all of us! (*Turns and sees Sarah Maud at the table.*) Where 's Larry, Sarah Maud?

SARAH MAUD. He ain't waked up.

MRS. RUGGLES (*in the door, left*). Peory, you git Larry out o' bed and started into his clothes.

PEORIA (*off stage, voice sleepy and protesting*). Oh, Ma, it's cold.

MRS. RUGGLES. Cold! O' course it's cold — Christmas ain't the Fourth of July. Move lively and you'll warm up! (*Sarah Maud has put the bread on the table, moves slowly across stage to door, left.*) Where are you a-goin'?

SARAH MAUD. To get Larry; breakfast's ready.

(*Peter is at the table, pouring milk into bowl and breaking bread into it. He has very large pieces and when his mother is n't looking, picks up the bowl and drinks out of it.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. (*Stares at Sarah Maud.*) You hain't had your own breakfast.

SARAH MAUD. I ain't hungry, very. And like as not Peory'll get on Larry's clothes wrong side out.

(*Exit Sarah Maud, door left. Behind the screen — voices.*)

CLEMENT (*protesting*). It ain't my turn! I got up first yesterday. (*Sound of a scramble.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*reaching over top of screen*). See here, Clem! Cornelius! Are you forgettin' what mornin' this is? You git right up, both of you, and

I don't want to hear nothin' more from neither of you.

(Feet appear on the floor and the bulging of the screen, with its tottering, threaten castastrophe.)

(Peter finishes breakfast, takes his bowl and spoon and puts them in the sink.)

(Mrs. Ruggles goes to the table, cuts off a slice of bread, butters it, and eats contentedly and abstractedly while she considers. She goes to the line of clothes, feels the garments, takes them down and rolls them as she does so, putting them on the ironing-board, which she puts in place from sink to back of chair.)

(Kitty enters from bedroom, her head a mass of neat, hard nubbins of white rags, curls in the bud. She is rubbing her eyes with one hand, buttoning her dress in the back with the other. She hurries to the store and stands before it shivering and holding out her hands to the heat.)

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Examines Kitty's hair and reties one rag carefully.)* Peter, can't you spread up the beds and put out the children's clean things so't I can git ter fittin' Larry's new suit? I wa'n't a mite satisfied with his clo'es an' I got up in the night an' planned *(stands with finger on her lip considering)* a way ter make him a dress out o' my plaid shawl —

KITTY. O Ma, not yer best shawl that Granpa McGrill give you?

MRS. RUGGLES. The best that my folks ever had — an' it was consid'able — ain't none too grand for a dinner-party at the Birds'. I thought to make it

kind o' Scotch style wi' the fringe to the bottom. Fringe is always stylish. (*Goes to bureau drawer, takes out the pieces of shawl, examines them, holding them up measuringly.*)

KITTY. What'll you wear yourself, when you go callin' on the neighbors, Ma?

MRS. RUGGLES (*evasively*). Something else — of course.

(*Peoria enters door, left, front. Her hair resembles that of Barnum's Circassian girl.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. Peory! (*Peoria jumps.*) Quick as you eat your breakfast I wisht you'd get the comb and see if you can't get the kinks out o' this fringe. It ain't been combed sence I wore it to your grandpa's funeral an' it's in an awful snarl.

(*Peoria nods and turns to cross to table.*)

(*Clement and Cornelius dash from behind the screen for the table. Peoria enters the contest and there is a good-humored scramble over the chairs. Kitty is already seated. Peoria is left without a seat, so she pulls the chair from under the ironing-board and it falls to the floor with a crash.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*who has been holding up the shawl and estimating its possibilities, turns suddenly*). Who done that?

(*Peoria is sitting in chair, Peter is picking up the board. Mrs. Ruggles puts the shawl on the dresser and walks majestically toward the table.*)

CORNELIUS (*without interrupting his eating*). Peory.

(*Peoria looks sulky.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*looks at Peoria sternly*). You help your brother pick up them clo'es or you know what's likely to happen.

(*Mrs. Ruggles takes the bundle of stockings and crosses down stage to left, sits running her hand into the stockings, matching them up.*)

(*Sarah Maud enters, dragging a yawning Larry by the hand, crosses to table, places him in Peoria's chair, "bibs" him, gives him a bowl of milk and spreads syrup on his bread. He is much cheered by the sight of food.*)

(*Peoria turns, sees Larry in her place — opens her mouth wide to protest, reconsiders, takes another bowl and a piece of bread, scowling blackly, and pouting — and retires to the wood box where she makes a hurried breakfast.*)

(*Peter goes behind the screen to make the bed.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*puzzling over the stockings*). Clem, you help Kitty with the dishes so's I can get right at Larry's suit. (*Kitty is already at the sink, taking out the pan. Clement rises protestingly.*) Now, Clement, don't begin that way, or you'll have trouble 'fore the day's over. (*Clement carries dishes to the sink.*)

(*Sarah Maud sits down for breakfast. Her mother is busy, does not notice this.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. Gracious, Sarah Maud, ain't you and Larry had enough breakfast yet? I wish you'd hurry, 'cause I want you to iron Cornelius's shirt and then sew up Larry's suit, 's quick as I git it fitted.

SARAH MAUD (*rising obediently*). Yes, Ma. (*Goes*

to the ironing-board, puts it in place and begins ironing.)

(Mrs. Ruggles, who has matched up the stockings and rolled each pair, picks up each little ball and nodding toward the child to whom it belongs, puts that ball on the other side of her chair. She does this with six pairs, stops at the last with a single stocking, shaking her head woefully. Goes through the performance again.)

MRS. RUGGLES (*naming each roll*). There's Sarah Maud's, Peter's, Kitty's, Cornelius's, Clem's, Larry's — There simply ain't no decent pair o' whole stockin's for Peory. (*The children all stare at her in dismay.*) It's so. I counted 'em over in my mind after I went to bed last night and even then I could n't make more'n thirteen and there ain't but six pairs anyhow you fix 'em. I ain't goin' ter have one o' my children wear odd stockin's to a dinner company, fetched up as I was! Not even if somebody has to stay ter home! (*Consternation. Mrs. Ruggles has an inspiration.*) Con, you run out and ask Mis' Cullen ter lend me a pair o' stockin's for Peory, an' tell her, if she will, Peory'll give Jim half her candy when she gets home. Won't yer, Peory?

PEORIA (*unable to control her grief, now that the threatening great horror becomes a definite small one, wails piercingly*). I don't want to give away my candy!

(Mrs. Ruggles rises slowly, stalks across to the now thoroughly frightened Peoria, — the other children watching open-mouthed, — takes Peoria

by the shoulder. She rises mechanically in response as one who knows the way to punishment. Mrs. Ruggles takes away her hand.)

MRS. RUGGLES. No. I vow I won't lick ye, Christmas Day; not if yer drive me crazy! But speak up smart now, an' say which you'd ruther do: give Jim Cullen half yer candy or (*a long pause, each of the children holding a sympathetic breath*) go to the party — barelegged?

PEORIA (*faintly*). Jim can have part of my candy.

MRS. RUGGLES (*patting her on the shoulder*). That's a lady. Run along, Con, and speak to Mis' Cullen. Be sure you make her understand that the stockin's will be worn to the dinner-party at the big house. If you ain't sure she hears the first time (*Con is at the door so that his mother raises her voice and speaks excitedly*), say it twice and say it loud. — The news 'll be up and down the alley by night and I'm willin' it should! (*Mrs. Ruggles crosses to left and takes up shawl.*)

(Peter who has been standing by the screen during this harrowing scene with a small bundle of red flannel in his hand, comes forward now and whispers to Mrs. Ruggles.)

MRS. RUGGLES. What do you say? (*Takes the flannel from him and holds it up in front of her. It is a very ragged suit of underwear. Mrs. Ruggles's voice is full of terrible thrills.*) Clement! (*Clement turns slowly on the soap box and stares at his mother.*) Is this your best suit of underflannins?

CLEMENT. (*Steps down from the box carefully and*

comes slowly across the stage to his mother; examines the garment carefully; looks up at her, smiling propitiatingly.) No 'm; it's my other one.

MRS. RUGGLES. Well, you can't wear this to no dinner-party. Where's your best one? *(Pause.)* Bring it here to once, so's I — *(Her glance is held by Clement's somewhat troubled look.)*

CLEMENT. It's — here I've got it on me.

MRS. RUGGLES. You've got it on you! *(Clement nods. Mrs. Ruggles considers.)* Take it off you, then, quicker 'n a wink! *(Clement still hesitates.)* Quick! hop into bed while I wash it out!

PETER. *(Stands by the screen.)* The bed's all made up! —

CLEMENT. Oh, Ma, I don't want to go to bed.

MRS. RUGGLES. Don't s'pose you do! I know it's bothersome, *but yer can't go into s'ciety 'thout takin' some trouble!* Be lively so the flannins 'll have time to dry. 'Cause if they ain't — you stay to home, — that's flat!

(Clement flies behind the screen, there's a scramble and the underwear is tossed over into the room.)

(Kitty turns from the dishpan, waving dish-cloth, indignantly.)

KITTY. I'd like to know who's goin' to wipe for me. I only wish I could get sent to bed!

MRS. RUGGLES *(has dragged a tub from the woodshed and has it on a chair, and is now at the stove getting the teakettle).* Probably you will, before we git through! — Peory, you git up there and wipe for Kitty. Sarah Maud, I guess you've got to leave them

things a minute and wash out these while I start Larry's dress.

(Takes Larry by the hand and leads him to the front of stage. Peoria moves slowly to the sink, picks up the fallen towel and wipes the dishes, Kitty has finished washing.)

(Sarah Maud puts her iron back on the stove and washes the under flannels, business of emptying tub, etc.)

(Kitty hangs up the pan, then moves slowly across to the mirror.)

(Mrs. Ruggles, who is holding the shawl up to Larry, sees her.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Kitty, you git busy finishin' the ironin'. There's your apron, and Peory's, and Con's shirt. And if you have time, a collar for Sarah Maud.

(Sarah Maud is carefully scrubbing the red flannel shirt.)

(Clement is behind the screen, popping up now and then and peeping over.)

(Kitty is ironing.)

(Peoria is unskillfully wiping the bowls and watching her mother.)

(Larry is on the verge of tears as Mrs. Ruggles lifts one little pudgy arm, then the other, holds the shawl up to his neck for length and then considers.)

(Mrs. Ruggles is most serious, frowns as one would over a most difficult task and spreads the pieces of the shawl on the floor in estimating display.)

(Sarah Maud has finished her washing and hung the union suit upon the line. As she finishes, Kitty gives her the iron and starts again for the mirror.)

MRS. RUGGLES (*severely*). Kitty, you stay where you be. Sarah Maud is goin' to help me.

(Kitty goes back reluctantly to the ironing and Sarah Maud comes to her mother, who is kneeling on the floor, giving the last pullings and shapings to the shawl.)

(Larry reaches up mechanically for Sarah Maud's kindly hand and she responds with hers.)

(Mrs. Ruggles rises, slowly, painfully, as with stiff joints, holds out cloth to Sarah Maud.)

MRS. RUGGLES. There, Sarah Maud, you sew up them seams — and be sure you sew strong, 'cause we don't want it to come apart to-night — an' now I'll git ready fer the washin'.

CLEMENT (*over the top of the screen*). Washin', Ma? Ain't it Wednesday?

MRS. RUGGLES. Yes, sir, *it is Wednesday, and it is washin'!* At twelve o'clock me an' Sarah Maud (*Peter enters from the door, right, front, Cornelius from the door, rear, in time to hear the dire words and with Kitty and Peoria, they glance anxiously toward the clock which is exactly 15 minutes to 12*) — at exactly 12 o'clock me an' Sarah Maud's goin' ter give yer sech a washin' an' combin' an' dressin' as yer never had before an' never will ag'in, likely (*family depression*), an' then I'm goin' to set yer down an' give yer two solid hours' trainin' in manners (*all the little*

Ruggleses bristle with additional discomfort). An' 't won't be no foolin' neither.

PETER (*gruffly and rebelliously, after a long horror-stricken silence in which all the Ruggleses have looked at each other sympathetically*). All we've got ter do 's go eat!

(*Mrs. Ruggles looks her scorn at Peter.*)

(*Sarah Maud is stitching carefully, but awkwardly, and Larry stands by her side with occasional pats on her arm. The shoulder seams are loosely put together and soon done.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. All yer got ter do's eat? Well, that's enough. There's more'n one way of eatin', let me tell yer, an' p'r'aps it's merciful yer don't know what a heap you've got ter learn about it, Peter Ruggles. (*Peter moves uneasily away from his mother, up stage.*) Land sakes! I wish you childern could see the way I was fetched up! I et my vittles in a dinin'-room every day of the week before I married your father; but yer can't keep up that style with seven young ones an' him allers off ter sea. (*Sighs.*)

(*The Ruggleses' eyes turn involuntarily to the picture of the sailor-man. There are five little reflective sighs — Sarah Maud is too busy and Larry too young to join.*)

CORNELIUS (*comes in the door*). Mis' Cullen wants to know, Ma, if these'll do. (*Unrolls a rather large pair of vivid-hued striped stockings.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*clasps her hands and says*). They'll be the makin' of you! — Ain't they stylish, Peory?

PEORIA (*slowly, uncertainly, staring at the stockings*).
Y-e-s, Ma.

CORNELIUS (*hilariously*). Nobody'll forget she's
got 'em on!

MRS. RUGGLES (*sharply*). Give 'em to her, Con.
(*Cornelius hands them over to Peoria, who takes
them with some natural aversion.*)

CORNELIUS (*breathless*). And, Ma, what do you
think Mis' Cullen says is all up an' down the alley?
— She says Mr. Bird has bought our house!

MRS. RUGGLES (*quickly*). What house?

CORNELIUS. *This house.*

MRS. RUGGLES. Mr. Bird *bought our house?*

CORNELIUS. That's what Mis' Cullen says. She
s'poses now we'll be goin' to hev steam heat an'
'lectrics put in.

MRS. RUGGLES (*suspiciously*). That's nothin'
but her spite. Mis' Cullen allers *was* envious.

PETER. P'raps Mr. Bird *told* Mis' Cullen he was
goin' to put in 'lectrics.

MRS. RUGGLES. 'T ain't likely he'd make any
confidences to *her*. Land sakes, childern, what do
you s'pose it means?

SARAH MAUD (*anxiously*). Ma, will Mr. Bird
come every week to collect the rent, — 'cause I'm
awful scared of him.

MRS. RUGGLES. I don't know, Sarah Maud; I'm
all kind o' flustered, but I can't help feelin' it means
somethin' good, comin' Christmas Day, this way.
Don't let's think about it. I don't dast, hardly,
an' we ain't got time. Give me Larry's dress, and

hand me my scissors — they're hanging underneath your Pa's "enlargement." (*Sarah Maud rises slowly and holds up completed dress.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. (*Takes dress with abstracted smile. Surveys children.*) Now, Sarah Maud, we can begin. I've got a boiler 'n' a kittle 'n' a pot o' hot water all ready. Peter, you take a big pitcher o' water out o' the kittle, and go into the back bedroom. Cornelius, you go with Peter, 'n' he'll help you. (*Peter gets water; exits. Mrs. Ruggles considers disposal of other children. Cornelius gets water; is leaving; Mrs. Ruggles halts him.*) Take the kittle with you. (*Cornelius returns; takes the kettle off, with great effort.*) Peory, you and Kitty take some water and go upstairs and —

PEORIA (*shivering*). Oh, Ma, it's cold up there.

MRS. RUGGLES. Y-e-s, I s'pose 't is; but you ain't used to no furnace-heated bathrooms, an' you've got to go to the party clean, anyway.

(*Peoria exits.*)

(*Clement shouts over screen.*)

CLEMENT. Yi, Peory, you forgot yer stockin's!

MRS. RUGGLES (*gathering them all up*). So you did. (*Drapes stockings over Peoria's arm.*) Here, Kitty, give these to the boys. (*Hands her stockings; then cheerfully and energetically.*) Now, Sarah Maud, you take Clem an' Larry, one to a time; scrub 'em, an' rinse 'em, — or 't any rate git's fur's yer can with 'em, — and then I'll finish 'em off while yer do yerself. Meantime, I'll git out the jewelry an' trimmin's and see how far they'll go.

(*Mrs. Ruggles goes to the bureau; opens the*

drawers; takes out small boxes from which she extracts various treasures.)

(Sarah Maud drags the washtub behind the stove; puts a generous amount of boiling water into it; adds cold, then drags slow-footed Larry behind the stove, out of sight and the audience sees several small garments lifted and waved in the air.)

CLEMENT *(over the screen)*. Sarah Maud ain't took me, Ma.

(Mrs. Ruggles turns; but before she can reassure him there is a splash as of some one slipping into water, and an agonized scream from Larry.)

LARRY *(after a slight pause, speaks as though trying to get his breath.)* HOT!

(As Mrs. Ruggles is about to rush to the rescue, Cornelius sticks a wet head in at the door.)

CORNELIUS. Ma! Peter won't give me the soap.

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Goes to the door and calls.)* Peter, you let Cornelius have that soap, part o' the time.

PETER *(voice off stage)*. I do! but he keeps it in the water and w-a-s-t-e-s it, paddlin' with it.

(Cornelius exits.)

(Mrs. Ruggles returns to her trinkets.)

(While Larry is still in the tub, Jack and Elfrida pass the window, left, and knock at the door.)

(Mrs. Ruggles straightens slowly and listens; the knock is repeated.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Some one's at the door! Quick, Sarah Maud, take Larry into the other room.

SARAH MAUD *(in an agonized whisper)*. I can't: he's in the tub.

(Mrs. Ruggles hurries across stage, looks at screen — Clement's head disappears — pushes table in front of stove as she goes, and sets it over the tub and Larry.)

MRS. RUGGLES. You keep Larry hid, and covered over, Sarah Maud; and I'll stand t'other side o' the room, so whoever 't is won't look your way. I hope to the land they won't stop long.

CLEMENT. *(Creeps to window; peeps out; whispers.)* It's the Birds' nurse-lady 'thout her cap, and the uncle. — S'pose they've come for the rent?

(Mrs. Ruggles stiffens with dismay, and for one cowardly moment contemplates inhospitality. Then she slowly pulls down her sleeves and, marching like a hero, opens the door.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Oh, Miss Elfrida, — ah — ah — A Merry Christmas to you! Will you step in a minute?

(Mrs. Ruggles does not move away from the door to admit her until Elfrida advances.)

(Elfrida has on the becoming fur turban, a little bouquet of holly in her jacket and on her muff, and looks rosy and pretty.)

ELFRIDA *(entering)*. Thank you, just a moment. It's a little early for calling. *(Jack follows.)* This is Mr. Bird, Mrs. Ruggles; Carol's uncle. And we came to say —

MRS. RUGGLES *(with short supply of breath)*. How do you do, Mr. Bird? I hope your health is good, Mr. Bird.

JACK *(lightly, but with glance of seriousness)*.

Much better than when I arrived, — thank — (*smiles at Elfrida*) you.

(*Mrs. Ruggles tries to make conversation, but is desperately conscious of various things that must be concealed. She either plucks an offending garment from its place — or some other business — between all the remarks. She might carelessly turn up the legs of Clement's wet union suit, over the line, so that they are not quite so obvious. She then looks at the stove, and carefully places two chairs with their backs to it.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. I am very glad, I'm sure. Won't you have a shirt — I mean a *seat*, Mr. Bird, — Miss Elfrida — er — (*Spies Larry's cast-off shirt and gathers it.*)

ELFRIDA. (*Sits.*) Thank you. Miss Carol sent us over to ask you —

(*Jack stands by her chair.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*forgetting her embarrassment in her worry. Center of stage*). The dinner ain't put off, is it? (*Quickly.*) Though (*Clement's head appears over the screen. Sarah Maud looks over the table*) of course it's all right if it is. Ain't Miss Carol so well?

JACK. Oh, yes; she's better, and planning great things for this evening. No, indeed; the Christmas dinner is n't postponed, you may be sure.

(*Clement retires behind the screen, and Sarah Maud returns to her lowly bathroom.*)

(*Jack roams about the room, stopping especially to observe Mr. Ruggles's picture, which would attract notice anywhere.*)

(Mrs. Ruggles watches him closely while she talks, and endeavors always to keep between him and the stove.)

ELFRIDA. We've come to make sure that *all* the children will be able to come. I suppose it's rather hard to have seven ready at the same time.

MRS. RUGGLES *(meaningly as Clement's head appears above the screen)*. All of the children are comin' — *(sees Clement's head)* I HOPE!!

(Clement sees the point and ducks quickly.)

JACK. *(At the mirror, into which he is smiling.)* I hope you don't mind my admiring your wonderful shells, Mrs. Ruggles. You see, I'm a bit of a sailor.

MRS. RUGGLES. Mr. Ruggles *(draws herself up proudly)* is a sailor, too!

JACK *(pointing to the picture)*. And this — is Mr. Ruggles?

MRS. RUGGLES *(joining him)*. Yes. He had that taken last time he was to home; three years ago, now. The photograph was real good, but I ain't never been satisfied with the enlargement. A lady who enlarges for a livin' come to the door and offered to do it for seventy-five cents. I don't hardly know what she done to Ruggles, but he don't look the same sence he was enlarged.

ELFRIDA *(rising and turning to Jack)*. But we're not delivering our message. *(To Mrs. Ruggles.)* Mrs. Ruggles, Mrs. Bird thought possibly you'd enjoy seeing the children at the games after the dinner, and she hopes you'll come in for a few minutes about eight o'clock.

MRS. RUGGLES. Come in? To the house? Me? To the party?

JACK. We'd like it awfully if you would. Do say "yes."

ELFRIDA (*as Mrs. Ruggles still hesitates*). I hope you have n't another engagement.

MRS. RUGGLES. Oh — er — no. P'r'aps I can manage. I can't just think it out — so quick.

JACK (*holding out his hand*). Don't think it out, Mrs. Ruggles; just come.

MRS. RUGGLES (*wiping her hand and putting it into his, slowly, and then looking up at him, pleased at his courtesy*). Oh, yes, I'll come, — if you really mean the family'd like to have me. I'm real sociable myself, an' I ain't never met Mr. Bird.

(*Hold this scene a second.*)

(*Outside the door a rattle, and Kitty's voice.*)

KITTY (*outside*). Ma'll do it, then, if you won't.

(*Enter Kitty, hair half out of its curl-papers. She notes the visitors; gasps; then retreats, hurriedly.*)

(*Elfrida starts toward the door. Jack follows.*)

(*Mrs. Ruggles circles them and stands in front of the table, outstretching her skirt with careful carelessness to shield the bather.*)

ELFRIDA (*holding out her hand*). Again, Merry Christmas, Mrs. Ruggles.

MRS. RUGGLES. Thank you kindly, ma'am. The same to you. And to you, sir; and (*jumping to an embarrassing conclusion*), may you spend many of them together, happy and prosperous.

(Elfrida is outside, but hears.)

(Jack is puzzled; then gets her meaning.)

JACK. Er — a — thank you! *(Pause. Grows serious.)* And I hope you'll let me thank you, too, many times, for the pleasure your children bring to Carol. *(Exits quickly.)*

(Mrs. Ruggles closes door slowly and leans against it.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Pleasure! Us! Well, what do you think of that!

LARRY *(plaintively, from the tub)*. I'm most soaked up!

CLEMENT *(appearing around the screen in his night attire)*. When's my wash goin' to begin? And is my shirt goin' to stay on the line forever? *(Mutinously.)* I'll dress without it, first thing you know!

KITTY. *(Enters door, right front.)* Ma, I can't get my curls out o' the rags.

PETER. *(Follows Kitty.)* I ain't got no necktie.

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Puts her hands to her ears.)* One to a time — one to a time! Sarah Maud, you help Peter empt' the water out, an' Clem can begin. Land sakes, it's worse'n a Monday! I'm glad we don't have to boil children an' dip 'em in bluein'-water same as you do clothes, or I *should* give up. As 't is, I don't want to see a tub for a month.

PETER. You bet I don't, neither!

MRS. RUGGLES. Bring Larry here, Sarah Maud, and finish him up. Kitty, come to me *(moves down stage to dresser; sits, left)* an' I'll fix your curls fer you. Where's Peory?

(Sarah Maud and Peter are emptying the tub.)

KITTY *(kneeling on floor in front of her mother)*. She's comin'. She can't get her stockin's so's the stripes ain't twisted; an' they're so big for her they keep slippin' down, showin' her knees. She thinks they're full grown-up size an' they will bag!

(Mrs. Ruggles arranges Kitty's ringlets.)

(Sarah Maud brings Larry, clad in his under garments up to his dress, down stage; places him on chair and scrubs his hands, scours his face, etc., etc., etc.)

(Mrs. Ruggles goes to bureau; takes out a green skirt with double row of brass buttons.)

MRS. RUGGLES. See here, Sarah Maud!

(Sarah Maud turns slowly from Larry and looks at her mother, but without much interest.)

(Mrs. Ruggles points to buttons.)

MRS. RUGGLES *(proudly)*. They're off yer uncle's policeman's uniform.

(The Ruggleses are dumb and wide-eyed with amazement at the sacrifice.)

MRS. RUGGLES *(quickly)*. 'Course you must be very careful not to lose one. *(Sarah Maud's faint smile fades.)* I sewed 'em on last night. Ain't it stylish! *(Holds out the skirt admiringly.)* Take it, Sarah Maud, and go an' git yerself together.

SARAH MAUD. Larry —

MRS. RUGGLES. I'll finish Larry.

LARRY *(piteously; somewhat red and raw)*. I AM finished — Honest I am!!!

(Kitty stands in front of mirror, putting on last touches.)

(Sarah Maud exits, door, left, front.)

(Peter sits at table, fingering the neckties and collars.)

(Mrs. Ruggles takes Larry and puts on the shawl dress. She looks at it admiringly; then takes out a red sash and ties it around his waist. The bottom of the fringe rises as the sash is tightened, and when Mrs. Ruggles sits back on her knees to inspect, her disappointment is keen.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Larry Ruggles, your dress is goin' to be too short!

(Larry smiles at her as at praise; then slowly realizes it is n't, and looks solemnly at the bottom of his dress.)

LARRY. Too short!

MRS. RUGGLES. I could just cry! Whatever shall we do?

(Mrs. Ruggles rises slowly; gets the scissors; returns; kneels beside Larry; takes off the sash, and, with the garment still on him, cuts the shawl along waist-line. It is held by a few threads only, but fastened beneath by a strip of white cloth which shows when the other fastenings are cut, and seems to be Larry's underwear. She takes pins and fastens the upper part of the shawl down, then the lower part up, and then re-ties the sash.)

(During the above performance Cornelius enters and joins Peter at the table. There is some slight business of dispute over collars.)

CLEMENT. Ma, is my shirt dry?

MRS. RUGGLES (*turning, with pins in her mouth*). Kitty, see if your brother's shirt's dry.

(*Kitty crosses stage, slowly, glancing admiringly at herself as she goes; feels of the shirt, while Clement and her mother wait anxiously; then announces, slowly.*)

KITTY. No; 't ain't; — but it's stopped steamin'.

CLEMENT. Oh, Ma, kin I wear the holey one? 'Tain't goin' ter show.

MRS. RUGGLES. (*Considers; tempted to yield her family pride.*) No, Clement. 'T would n't be proper respect to the Birds. 'T ain't no use to look good outside if you're all the time rememberin' somethin' wrong inside. Put on yer sleepers again. Peter, stuff some more wood in the stove. — An' Kitty, move the shirt along the line.

(*Clement appears in his "sleepers" and watches anxiously.*)

(*Peter gets the wood and puts it into the stove with a great clatter.*)

(*Kitty moves the shirt slightly; then crosses stage to mirror again.*)

(*Clement feels of his shirt, anxiously; then moves it still nearer, and sits, right, on wood box, watching it closely.*)

(*As Larry's toilet is finished, Mrs. Ruggles carefully places him on a chair, right, front, so that there shall be no tension on the pins.*)

(*Peoria enters at door, left; crosses to center, stiffly. All turn and watch her, gazing chiefly at*

her stockings. Her hair has resisted all advances in the shape of hair oils and sticks out determinedly.) (Pause.)

CORNELIUS. (*Convulsed.*) Look at 'er hair! Ain't it jest like a circus picter?

CLEMENT. An' her laigs! Ain't yer got no casters to put on 'em?

MRS. RUGGLES. Clement McGrill Ruggles! (*Clement rises slowly.*) Ain't yer ashamed of yerself? — callin' names. You march right into the bedroom and stay there until —

(Clement crosses stage, slowly.)

(Peoria watches him; first with pleasure in his punishment, then, as he reaches her, she throws her arms about him.)

PEORIA. Don't punish him to-day, Ma.

MRS. RUGGLES. You're right, Peory; you're a real lady. Come back, Clem.

(Clement returns to his seat on the wood box.)

(Peter stands by the sink.)

(Cornelius is right of table.)

(Larry is on chair to right, front.)

(Peoria and Kitty are both looking into the mirror.)

(Mrs. Ruggles stands center stage back, hands on hips, looking from one to the other.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Now, if Sarah Maud —

(Door, left, front, opens; Sarah Maud enters.)

LARRY (*jumping from chair and running to her.*) She's here! She's here!

MRS. RUGGLES. (*At the bureau. Surveys Sarah Maud, who is embarrassed by her elegance.*) Well,

now, ain't that skirt han'some! (*Holds up a collar, admiringly.*) Here's a collar you can wear.

(*Sarah Maud comes to center. Larry follows.*)

SARAH MAUD (*slowly*). Why, Ma, it's your'n!

MRS. RUGGLES. Well, what o' that?

SARAH MAUD. What are *you* goin' to wear to the party?

(*The children all stare with the same idea.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*slowly*). I? I had n't thought o' that. But you must hev this. (*Adjusts collar.*) My! How it does dress yer up! You look real nice, fer once. Peter, you kin wear this scarf pin — your pa an' me was married in it. Come here till I sew it in yer tie; the ketch is off. (*As she sews it in.*) Cornelius, you hand Clem a collar and necktie; an' you take the cuffs, — your neck is shorter an' it don't need hid-in' so much as his'n. Now, Peter, you an' Clem an' Cornelius put the chairs in line, an' we're ready for our trainin'.

(*Peter and Cornelius tug up the chairs.*)

CLEMENT. (*Rises slowly; walks to the line and feels of his shirt. Despairingly.*) 'T ain't dry.

MRS. RUGGLES. Lor' sakes, ain't it? Put in another stick. We might 'a' bought another shirt with the wood we've used up. You'd better come to the lesson, 'cause I can't have yer goin' there with no manners, in case yer shirt *should* dry in time.

PETER. (*Five chairs in line.*) There ain't enough chairs.

MRS. RUGGLES. Why should there be? What family ever wants to set down all to once? Fetch up the

coal hod fer Larry. Put a newspaper on it, Cornelius. Clem, you bring the box an' set on that. Now, all of you get in place, accordin' to yer age. — No, Sarah Maud; let Larry go to the foot by himself, where he belongs.

(Larry walks slowly to the foot.)

(As they are all seated, Mrs. Ruggles stands to right of them; walks before them as an inspecting officer, to left, her hands on her hips, and her eyes filled with pride.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Well, — if I do say so, as should n't, — I never seen a cleaner, more stylish mess of childern in my life! I do wish Ruggles could see you now. . . . Larry Ruggles, how many times hev I got ter tell yer not ter keep pullin' yer sash? . . . Ain't I warned you, if it comes ontied, yer waist an' skirt 'll part company in the middle, an' then where'll you be?

(Larry loses his balance and falls off the coal hod. He is returned to erect position.)

(Mrs. Ruggles sighs.)

MRS. RUGGLES. We're losin' time, an' we ain't got down to real work yet. Now, look me in the eye — all o' yer. *(Pauses while she surveys the palpitating Ruggleses in turn.)* I've often told yer what kind of a family the McGrills is, hev n't I? *(Six Ruggleses nod solemnly. Clement nudges Larry, who slowly sets his head in motion. It goes for several minutes, like the head of a plaster donkey.)* I've got reason to be proud, goodness knows! Yer uncle is on the police force o' Pittsburg. You can take up the paper 'most

any day an' see his name printed right out, James McGrill, an' I can't hev my childern fetched up common, like some folks'. When they go out, they've got to hev clo'es, — an' learn to act decent! Now, I want ter see how yer goin' to behave when yer git there ter-night.

(Sarah Maud folds her hands patiently in her lap and holds her head down.)

(Peter puts his heels together stiffly on the floor, folds his arms, and scowls.)

(Peoria twists her zebra legs and vainly endeavors to cover her knees with her unwilling skirt.)

(Kitty tosses her ringleted head.)

(Cornelius holds to the bottom of his chair as though tobogganning.)

CLEMENT *(moving uneasily; grumbles, with a look at the wash on the line)*. What's the use o' havin' manners if yer ain't got no shirt?

(Larry threatens to tumble off the coal hod again.)

MRS. RUGGLES. A dinner-party ain't so awful easy as you think. Let's start in at the beginnin' an' act out the whole business. Pile into the bedroom there an' show me how yer goin' to go into the parlor. This'll be the parlor, an' I'll be Mis' Bird.

(Sarah Maud leads the way, and all except Clement follow her: he goes to the stove and feels of his shirt.)

CLEMENT. 'T ain't dry.

MRS. RUGGLES. Put in more wood, and hurry along. *(Clement does so.)*

(Mrs. Ruggles feels of the shirt anxiously, then draws chair to front of stage, left, and assumes great dignity.)

(From the time of the exit of the Ruggleses, there has been the sound of scuffling, and Kitty's piercing soprano is heard.)

KITTY *(from outside)*. Don't jam my curls! Keep away from me!

(Every child giggles but Larry and Sarah Maud.)

(Door bursts open, and Peoria and Clement are catapulted into the room. Peter, Cornelius, and Kitty scramble for place beside them. Larry attempts to find a way between Peter and Cornelius, and tumbles in, while Sarah Maud stands in the doorway.)

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Rises, slowly.)* There! I knew yer'd do it in some sech fool way. Now, go in there an' try it over again, every last one o' ye; an' if Larry can't come in on two legs he can stay ter home: d'yer hear?

(The Ruggleses, troubled by their mother's manner, file back into the room, quietly, and re-appear; a very tame entrance this time. Sarah Maud is at the head of the line, Larry at the foot. They keep step, and Sarah Maud leads the way, back of the chairs and up the line to her seat.)

(As Clement passes the shirt, he feels it; then slowly walks to place.)

MRS. RUGGLES *(while they are marching in)*. No, no, no! That's worse yet! Yer look for all the world

like a gang o' pris'ners. There ain't no style ter that. Spread out more, can't yer; an' act kind o' careless-like — nobody's goin' ter kill yer! That ain't what a dinner-party is. You need n't go back now; but remember what I say, and come into the room as though you was in the habit of goin' to parties ev'ry day o' your life!

(As they are all seated but Clement he goes to the line, seizes his shirt, and, with a leap of joy across the stage, shouts.)

CLEMENT. It's dry! It's dry! *(Goes behind screen to dress.)*

MRS. RUGGLES. It ought to be aired, and probably you'll get yer death: but maybe it's wuth it. Don't slight yerself now; comb yer hair, an' listen to what I'm a-tellin' th' others. *(They are all seated by this time.)* Now, yer know there ain't 'nough hats to go 'round; an' if there was I don' know as I'd let yer wear 'em, fer the boys 'ud never think to take 'em off when they got inside — fer they never do: but, anyhow, there ain't 'nough good ones. Now look me in the eye. *(They all attempt to.)* You're only jest goin' around the corner; yer need n't wear hats, none o' yer; an' when yer get int' the parlor, if they should happen to say anything about hats, Sarah Maud must speak up *(Sarah Maud shows her dismay)* an' say it was sech a pleasant evenin' an' sech a short walk that yer lef' yer hats ter home. Now, can yer remember?

CHORUS OF RUGGLESSES. Yes, marm.

MRS. RUGGLES. What hev you got ter do with it?

Did I tell *you* to say it? Warn't I talkin' to Sarah Maud? (*All but Kitty, who is pert, and Larry, who does n't understand, hang their heads. Larry sees them, then slowly and solemnly does likewise.*) Now, we don't leave nothin' to chance: try it, Sarah Maud. Speak up.

SARAH MAUD (*in a low, trembling voice*). It was sech a pleasant evening (*Mrs. Ruggles nods approval*) and sech a short hat —

MRS. RUGGLES. Short *hat*! Oh! Whatever shall I do with you? Short *walk*; short walk: can't yer remember that?

SARAH MAUD (*uncertainly*). Sech a pleasant walk an' sech a short evenin', — yes'm; I kin remember.

MRS. RUGGLES. Now, Cornelius, what are you goin' ter say ter make yerself good comp'ny?

CORNELIUS. (*Sits up in alarm; his eyes pop; his breath is short.*) Do? *Me*? Dunno!

MRS. RUGGLES. Well, ye ain't goin' ter set there like a bump on a log — air ye? — 'thout sayin' a word ter pay fer yer vittles? Ask Mrs. Bird . . . if she's got good help in the kitchen, . . . or how she's feelin' this evenin' (*with very much manner*) or if Mr. Bird's hevin' a busy season . . . or some kind o' party-talk, like that!

(*Cornelius is most unhappy. Peter unsympathetically joyous.*)

(*Mrs. Ruggles has a sudden thought.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. No; come to think about it, — 't would n't do for you to take the lead that way. Peter's the one: he's the oldest. Peter, you open

up with Mr. Bird, and remember he's consid'able stiff and stand-offish, though he may be a little easier to-night if he's bought the house for us.

(Peter's joy fades, while Cornelius's anxiety decreases suddenly.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Now *(sighs, as with relief)*, we'll make-b'lieve that we're at the table: that won't be so hard 'cause yer'll hev somethin' ter do — it's awful bothersome to stan' still an' act stylish. *(Slowly.)* If they hev napkins, Sarah Maud down to Peory may put 'em in their laps, an' the rest of ye can tuck 'em in their necks. Don't eat with yer fingers. *(The Ruggleses grow solemn.)* Don't grab vittles off one 'nother's plate: don't reach out fer nothin', but wait till yer asked: an' if yer never *git* asked, don't git up an' grab it *(they all wait anxiously for a clue to behavior in this awful possibility)*; jes' go without! Don't spill nothin' on the tablecloth, or like's not Mis' Bird 'll send yer away from the table: an' I hope she will, too.

(Cornelius gives a long sigh.)

(Clement bursts forth from behind the screen.)

CLEMENT *(leaping with joy)*. Hurrah! I'm ready.

(Twelve care-filled eyes are turned toward him.)

He takes his place.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Now, we'll try a few things ter see how they'll go. Mr. Clement, do you eat cram-b'ny sarse?

CLEMENT. Bet yer life!

(There is a moment of deathly quiet. All the other Ruggleses look at him in amazement. Clement is puzzled.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Clement McGrill Ruggles, do you mean to tell me that you'd say that to a dinner-party? I'll give ye one more chance. Mr. Clement, will you take some of the cramb'ry?

CLEMENT (*slowly; the others watch him*). Yes, marm; thank ye kindly, — 'f yer happen ter have any handy.

MRS. RUGGLES. Very good: but they won't give yer two tries to-night. (*The following taken very quickly.*) Miss Peory, do yer speak for white or dark meat?

PEORIA. I ain't pertic'lar as to color; anything that nobody else wants will suit me.

MRS. RUGGLES. First-rate! Nobody could speak more genteel than that. Miss Kitty, will you have hard or soft sarse with your pudden?

KITTY (*with composure*). Hard or soft? Oh, a little of both; an' I'm much obliged.

(*Business of pointing finger of shame. Peter grunts.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. You stop yer gruntin', Peter Ruggles. That warn't greedy; that was all right. I wish I could git it into yer heads that it ain't so much what yer say as the way yer say it. . . . An' don't keep starin' cross-eyed at your necktie pin, or I vow I'll take it away an' sew it on Clem or Cornelius. Sarah Maud'll keep her eye on it, an' if it turns broken side out she'll tell yer. (*Sarah Maud droops a bit more.*) Gracious! I should n't think you'd ever seen nor worn no jool'ry in yer life! — Kitty, lend your hank'chief to Peory if she needs it, an' I hope she'll know when she *does* need it, though I don't

expect it! — Larry! (*Larry looks up, frightened*) you're too little to train; so you jest look at the rest an' do 's they do, an' the Lord have mercy on ye an' help ye to act decent. — Now is there anything more ye'd like to practice?

PETER. If yer tell me one more thing, I can't set up an' eat. I'm so cram full o' manners now I'm ready to bust 'thout no dinner at all.

CORNELIUS. Me, too.

MRS. RUGGLES (*who has been walking back and forth, stops at right*). Well, I'm sorry fer yer both! If the 'mount o' manners yer've got on hand now troubles yer, you're hurt dretful easy. (*Starts toward the door as though to open it. The children watch eagerly.*) Now, Sarah Maud (*Sarah Maud winces*), when the time comes, you must git up an' say, "I guess we'd better be goin'." Hev yer got that int' your head?

SARAH MAUD. Jest when do I get up?

MRS. RUGGLES (*easily*). About once in so often.

SARAH MAUD (*rising slowly*). About once in so often?

MRS. RUGGLES. If they say, "Oh, no; set a while longer," yer can set: but if they don't say nothin', you've got ter get up an' go.

SARAH MAUD (*mournfully*). Seem's if this whole dinner-party set right square on top o' me. Mebbe I could manage my own manners; but to manage seven mannenses is worse 'n stayin' to home.

MRS. RUGGLES (*easily; patting Sarah Maud on the shoulder*). Oh, don't fret, I guess you'll git along.

I would n't mind if folks would only say, "Oh, children will be children." But they won't. They'll say "Who on earth fetched them children up?" It's a quarter past five now an' yer (*the children rise, slowly*) can go.

(As they are on the way to the door and Mrs. Ruggles is holding it open for them, a thought suddenly strikes her and she comes back, nearer to the group.)

MRS. RUGGLES. Land o' goodness, what are we thinkin' about! Here you are, goin' to the big house without a sign of a present. 'Course they're so rich they don't need nothin'; but 't ain't much of a Christmas if yer jest go to the party for what yer can carry away. Stand still a second and let's think what we can give to Mis' Bird.

(The Ruggles family reflects. Sarah Maud walks to bureau; Kitty to closet; Peter consults his pockets; Cornelius the ceiling; Clement nudges Cornelius to bespeak his appreciation of the joke, and then tiptoes to stove, opens oven door and peers in as if he expected to find a diamond necklace or grand piano there.)

KITTY. (*Inspired.*) Ma! Could we spare the plush table-drape?

MRS. RUGGLES. Land, I had n't never thought o' partin' with that! I was goin' ter hev it on when yer pa come home: but there! mebbe 't would be dark, an', anyhow, like as not, he'd never notice it, he'd be so taken up with you children. Get it out, Sarah Maud, an' let's have a look at it.

(Sarah Maud comes to front and holds up the sacred object. It is a scarf of bright-colored cotton plush with bold design in lustre paint and cord of many colors. It is of appalling hideousness.)

SARAH MAUD. O Ma! Can you give it up?

MRS. RUGGLES *(complacently)*. It is rich, ain't it?

PETER. There could n't be nothin' too rich for the Birds. I've been all over the house, 'most, and I know.

MRS. RUGGLES. An' there ain't any use givin' a present 'thout you give somethin' worth while. Well, what say? Can we do without the table-drape?

RUGGLES { PEORIA. Yes, ma'am.

CHILDREN { PETER. Yes, sir-ee.

(together.) { CORNELIUS. 'Course we kin.

LARRY *(slowly; imitating Peter)*. Yes, — sir — e-e.

CLEMENT *(having no special love for the beautiful, remarks cheerfully in the same breath with the others)*.

"Let her go, Gallagher!"

MRS. RUGGLES. Remember what day 't is, an' don't talk slang, Clement.

KITTY. Ma, may I hand the table-drape to Mis' Bird, when it comes time?

MRS. RUGGLES. Yes, if you think you can do it real nice. Just say, loud an' clear, "From Mis' Ruggles with the season's compliments." Wrop it up quick, Sarah Maud, for fear I shall lose my courage and keep it. *(Sarah Maud clumsily wraps the drape, Mrs. Ruggles watching, sadly.)* Now we're all ready. Don't let on a word about Mr. Bird's buyin' the

house till we know more about it. Remember about the hats. —

(Sarah Maud looks back, woe-begone, and her lips move, "Such a pleasant evening, such a short walk.")

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Very quickly.)* Don't all talk ter once. *(Those in sight — all but Sarah Maud and Larry — stop in amazement.)* Kitty, lend yer hank'chif to Peory an' keep it in plain sight all the time: Peter, don't keep screwin' yer scarf-pin: Cornelius, hold yer head up. *(They are all out now.) (Mrs. Ruggles leans out the door.)* Sarah Maud, don't take yer eyes off of Larry: Larry, keep holt o' Sarah Maud: an' whatever yer do, all of yer, never forgit fer one second that yer mother was a McGrill!

CURTAIN

ACT III

THE ANGEL OF THE CRUTCHES

SCENE: *Same as Act I, except for lighting, decoration, and presence of a large table behind screen. The room is trimmed with garlands of holly and evergreen, and a bunch of mistletoe hangs somewhere. A Christmas Tree in smaller room is clearly seen whenever the doors, right, back, are opened.*

When the curtain lifts, heavy rose-colored curtains are drawn across the windows, shutting them from view and making the rear wall seem even. It is before these hangings that Carol's chair is placed when the Act opens. The color and lines of the draperies give warmth to the childish figure, all in white.

In the first Act, this room was lighted entirely by sunlight, which streamed in through the windows at left. Now these windows are hidden by the rose-colored curtains, and about the room are placed four or six tall church candles, in candlesticks, but supplied with electric bulbs. When the curtain lifts, these are not lighted; neither are the candles on the dinner-table, which is carefully dressed and placed halfway down stage. Its service is delicate and lacy in effect. The table is round, and so placed that it is prominent when wanted, but easily pushed into the background. Across the back and side are placed screens, which entirely hide the table from those on the stage, but permit the audience to watch the preparations.

The first effect of the lifting of the curtain is to focus attention upon the slight droop of the little figure in the chair. As much beauty and grace as it is possible to muster should go to the forming of this brief picture.

Elfrida is arranging flowers on the table: Jack is assisting. In a second, the door, right, front, opens and Mrs. Bird enters. The droop disappears, and Carol is erect and aglow with Christmas interest.

CAROL (*with a happy smile of greeting, holding out one hand*). Is Daddy coming up, mother?

MRS. BIRD (*turning her head so that Carol does not see the wrinkle of worry which the question brings*). He may — later (*quickly*), but not while they're eating.

(Carol looks a bit disappointed. Mrs. Bird crosses to her quickly.)

JACK. (*Steps forward from behind the screen. He frowns, but then smiles at Carol and says lightly.*) That's lucky, Carol; and very considerate of Daddy. Could they eat if dignified old Don stood looking on? I hardly think so.

CAROL (*considering this point carefully*). Y-e-s, — I had n't thought of that. If you did n't know Daddy — he might — frighten you. I almost wish we had asked Dr. Bob to come to dinner. He *is* such fun, and he's one of the family now!

MRS. BIRD. He is coming for the games, you know, later on. He would n't miss the pleasure for the world!

ELFRIDA (*coming out from behind the screen*). The

table is quite ready, Carol. Shall I light the candles now?

CAROL. It must be almost time for the children to come, is n't it, mother dear?

MRS. BIRD. (*Now stands slightly to right of Carol's chair. Jack is directly back, and Elfrida stands to left, down stage by corner of the screen.*) Almost time.

(*Elfrida goes toward table.*)

CAROL. May I help, please?

(*Mrs. Bird nods.*)

JACK. (*Goes to Carol to pick her up in his arms.*) Who but the Christmas Child could light the candles properly?

CAROL (*smiling up at him*). O Uncle Jack, I'm too big to carry: I must walk. (*Jack puts her down, slowly. Elfrida pulls aside the screen, and Carol lights the candles on the table, and then clasps her hands in delight.*) Is n't it like a fairy dinner-table? (*Holds out one hand, and her mother quickly takes and holds it.*)

MRS. BIRD. Yes, is n't it dear?

JACK. Now has the time come for the great effect? (*Points to the tall electric candles about the room. Carol nods. He turns on the switch and the room becomes a bewitching contest of light and shade, the yellow light of the table candles contrasting with the pink light cast by the shaded electric candles. The sound of a bell ringing, timidly; then a vigorous pull.*)

CAROL. Here they come. Quick, Elfrida; the screen. (*Elfrida places the screen before the table.*) Uncle Jack, will you help? Mother and you are the

only ones who can make them feel comfortable right away. Mother always — knows how.

(Jack helps Carol to her chair. Mrs. Bird goes to the door, and, as she reaches it, a stiff, correct, and unsmiling butler appears. (Possibly one actor can play both Mr. Bird and the butler: or, the butler, though an addition to the scene, may be omitted.) Back of him one hears the clatter of many shoes on slippery floors. As the butler stands, taking a deep breath with which to announce "The Ruggleses," the members of this interesting family begin slowly to ooze past him, — not eagerly, but with dignity and reserve. Sarah Maud appears first and stands beside the butler, who is too astounded to close his mouth or to let it voice their names. Sarah Maud's lips are still telling their social "beads." Peter follows; his hands glued to the seams of his trousers and his knees unbending. He steps beside Sarah Maud, and stands motionless. Then Peoria comes in, slowly and with her somewhat sidelong gait. They do not all look at the butler. Peoria gives him a glance of open-mouthed awe. Cornelius stubs his toe on him and looks up to see what "did it." Kitty shakes his devitalized hand in passing. Jack retires quickly behind the screen and struggles to smother his impulse to shout with laughter. Kitty and Clement come in quickly, Kitty hurrying to keep ahead of Clement, who is the only smiling and blithe-spirited one in the crowd. After entering they all look at Mrs. Bird with trepidation.)

SARAH MAUD. (*With great speed, even before they are all in line. Mrs. Bird waits, thinking this the family training and not caring to confuse them by interruption.*) It — was — such — a — pleasant evening — an' — such — a — short — walk — that — we — thought — we thought — we thought —

KITTY (*helping out*). That we thought — we had n't good hats enough to go round. (*Ruggles tableau!! Kitty continues, in order to hide her terrible slip and change the subject at any cost.*) Here's a present for you, Mis' Bird, — a table-drape from mother with the best of the season's compliminks. (*Unrolls "drape," which has such an effect on Jack that Mrs. Bird is obliged to warn him by a gesture.*)

MRS. BIRD. It was a good idea to leave your hats at home, and I am very much obliged for my nice Christmas present. Now will you come and speak to Carol? She's —

(*The line of Ruggleses starts to file across stage.*

Jack stands back of Carol's chair.)

CAROL (*suddenly*). Where's Larry? Did n't he come?

(*The line stops and takes a breath of worry, each one staring down the line of brothers and sisters.*)

SARAH MAUD. (*Whispers.*) Where's Larry?

CLEMENT. Gracious! Where is Larry?

KITTY. I know he came, 'cause he stumbled over the mat downstairs, and I scolded him. I wish't I had n't now.

JACK. Well, well! (*Laughing.*) Are you quite certain there were more of you?

PEORIA (*timidly, and wriggling away a bit*). I think so, sir. (*More quickly.*) But, anyhow, there was Larry.

(*Her expression is very tearful and her lips tremble. Carol reaches out and draws Peoria to her.*)

JACK. Cheer up. Probably he's not lost — only mislaid. I'll find him for you.

(*Crosses stage to door, right. Sarah Maud turns and follows closely at his heels. At the door he turns to say something reassuring; sees Sarah Maud; is surprised.*)

SARAH MAUD (*stammering*). I'll — I'll go, too, if you please, sir (*more firmly*); for it's my place to mind him, an' if he's lost (*an outburst*) — I can't relish my vittles!

(*The Ruggleses stand breathing heavily and watching the door anxiously. It is open, and Sarah Maud is heard.*)

SARAH MAUD. Larry! Larry!

LARRY. (*Outside. Plainly.*) Here I be!

SARAH MAUD. (*Outside.*) Come to Sarah Maud.

LARRY (*still invisible*). I can't. Sum— sum— sumpin's — got me!

(*Clatter of sticks falling; then Jack reappears, leading Larry, and Sarah Maud follows.*)

JACK. He got lost — in your grove of umbrellas, Mary. No wonder he was frightened. How could he know there were n't alligators and —

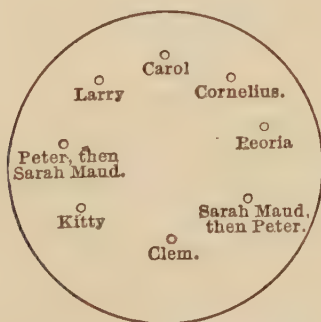
CAROL (*holding up her finger, warningly, and laughing*). Now, Uncle Jack! You promised — you'd be good.

JACK (*with exaggerated alarm, turning to Carol, while Mrs. Bird takes Larry, and Elfrida stands by the screen, waiting for the signal*). Did I promise that?

CAROL. You did. And will you please help Elfrida with the screens? (*Jack crosses to screen.*) Because, I think we 're ready.

(*The Ruggleses are all facing to left. As Carol says "ready," Elfrida pushes back the screen and Jack takes it away. Mrs. Bird goes to door, right, opens it, and the butler enters and waits in the door with a tray bearing the turkey. The Ruggleses stand motionless as the beauty of the table slowly penetrates their slow little minds.*)

LARRY (*after a pause, gives a happy toss of his head, a gurgle of delight, and then trots blithely across stage and clambers into the high chair, center of table, back. He claps his hands in ecstasy as he surveys the table, rests his fat little arms on the table and cries aloud, his whole body a-quiver with delight*). I beat the hull lot o' yer!!!



(In the confusion which follows the laugh, Carol flutters to the table, and without outward appearance of direction the Ruggleses are seated. Business of fumbling with the napkins, Sarah Maud and Peter first sticking them in at their necks, then remembering and retrieving their errors. Various bits of awkwardness will characterize each member of the family as the scene is rehearsed.)

(The butler holds the tray, very steadily and unsmilingly. Mrs. Bird watches with motherly eye, and rescues embarrassed Ruggleses from various difficulties.)

(Jack and Elfrida take the turkey platter from the butler's tray and place it on the table before the entranced Ruggleses. Butler exits for vegetables, and throughout the scene comes and goes, bringing and taking away dishes.)

MRS. BIRD. *(In the moment of quiet which succeeds seating at the table. Standing behind Carol's chair.)* Jack, Elfrida, children: It is n't exactly like a grace, but Carol will say something that she has said at every Christmas dinner since she was old enough to talk.

(Carol rises a little from her chair, leaning on her crutch. As she bows her head, Jack and Mrs. Bird and Elfrida do the same: one Ruggles after another follows suit, magnetized by the silence. Peter gently bows Larry's for him, when he glances up and discovers that the child does not quite comprehend.)

(The chief Angel of the Prologue parts the cur-

tains at the window, back; stands for a moment with finger on lip; then bows her head.)

(Pause.)

CAROL.

The Baby born in Bethlehem
 A sorry shelter had,
 While we who gather here to-night
 Are warm and softly clad.

The Baby born in Bethlehem
 Was fed on humble fare,
 And yet our board is richly spread
 With dainty food and rare.

Our beds are downy-smooth and white,
 He slumbered in the hay:
 'Tis good that we remember this
 Each blessèd Christmas Day.

And good that we remember, too,
 To pay our thanks and praise
 To Heav'nly Love that brought us here
 And gave this Day of days.

(The Angel retreats softly, closing the curtains after her. Jack, Mrs. Bird, and Elfrida show in their faces various emotions. Then Jack takes the turkey off the table to carve; the butler enters with vegetables; Elfrida and Mrs. Bird help about the table, and in a moment, though gradually, the spirit of jollity and fun is resumed and as gradually mounts.)

(Carol leans over and pins a sprig of holly first on Larry's dress, then on Cornelius's jacket. Then, as there is opportunity, each Ruggles comes to her chair, in turn, and receives his Christmas decoration.)

PETER *(nudging Kitty and whispering noisily)*. Look, will yer: ev'ry feller's got his own partic'lar butter.

KITTY. *(Same business.)* I s'pose it's to show you can eat that much an' no more. And see! the napkins is marked with big letters.

(Butler removes tray filled with plates.)

PETER. I s'pose that's so's nobody'll nip 'em. Why don't that stuffed club that brings the vittles in set down with us?

(Mrs. Bird, Jack, and Elfrida busy about table.)

CLEMENT *(pleased)*. The plums is all took out o' my cramb'ry sarse, an' it's friz to a stiff jell.

LARRY. *(A loud peal of joy as he beats on the table with his fists.)* Hi-yah! I got a wish-bone!

(Sarah Maud, pale and trembling, rises slowly.)

SARAH MAUD. I guess I'd better change my seat. Larry gen'ally sets beside me, and he might feel strange.

(Peter and Sarah Maud change places.)

PETER *(coming around table says to Clement)*. She wants to set where she can kick him under the table when he goes wrong.

KITTY. I declare to goodness, there's so much to look at I can't scarcely eat nothin'.

CLEMENT. Bet yer life I can. *(Illustrates liberally.)*

(Indeed, everybody is very busy, eating and serving. The bored butler has returned with a tray of steaming dishes. Mrs. Bird is superintending, Jack and Elfrida busy placing and removing dishes. Elfrida leans over and cuts up morsels for the smaller ones. Carol is beaming and nodding, etc., etc., when

THE CURTAIN FALLS FOR A MINUTE OF INTERMISSION, *which represents a half-hour.*)

(The scene when the curtain descends must be one of great eating activity on the part of the Ruggleses. Elbows are bowed, and knives and forks are being plied with more zest than skill.)

(Carol is beaming and happy, but not eating.)

(Mrs. Bird is watching Carol first, then the Ruggleses. Jack is intent upon carrying heavy dishes for Elfrida, then convulsed at the spectacle of the Ruggleses; and all this he interrupts to hover about, touch, and smile at Carol, tenderly.)

(When the curtain lifts again, the only light of the room is from the table candles. The table is almost free of dishes, but is surrounded now by a very different-looking lot of children. Each one wears a cap of soft-colored tissue paper. The torn bonbons are upon the floor and the table. Festivity has banished all consciousness of social shortcomings.)

LARRY. *(Climbs down from his chair slowly; walks center of stage; speaks slowly and sadly.)* I can't eat nothing more!

(All the other little Ruggleses rise, slowly.)

PETER. If they'd 'a' passed the puddin' again, I could n't 'a' swallowed it: I'd 'a' had to hang it on the outside.

(Jack pulls back Carol's chair and is about to hand her the crutch when Clement steps up, embarrassed.)

CLEMENT *(with a tenderness which conquers his awkwardness)*. Say! Lem-me, will yer?

(Jack hesitates. Carol nods to him, puts her hand on Clement's arm and rises slowly and pauses, resting upon his shoulder. He stands very still and very proudly.)

(Unaccustomed to napkins, the Ruggleses forget them, and as they stand, the napkins fall to the floor. Careful Sarah Maud goes about painfully picking up and folding each one until Elfrida rescues her (all this in business; no words). As Elfrida takes the napkins from her, Sarah Maud becomes conscious of the waiting group of brothers and sisters, and walking slowly around the table, comes down stage, center.)

SARAH MAUD *(reluctantly, but conscientiously)*. I -- I guess we'd better be a-goin'.

(The joy fades from the other Ruggleses' faces. There is a moment of suspense.)

CAROL *(brightly; laughingly)*. Oh, no, no! Not yet, Sarah Maud. *(Puts her arm into Sarah Maud's. Clement has led Carol to center of stage, and the other little Ruggleses have instinctively grouped themselves about her, so that, when Sarah Maud joins them, the grouping*

is suggestive of the half-moon shielding the bright star. Mrs. Bird is to the right, Elfrida at the table, and Jack outside the half-moon, to left. Carol glances at Mrs. Bird.) Is it ready, mother?

MRS. BIRD. Yes, dear. *(Goes to the doors, right, back.)*

CAROL. Then we'll go with mother.

(She directs their attention to the doorway as Mrs. Bird opens the doors. The Ruggleses stand amazed for a minute, then break into shouts of joy, and, forgetting Carol, scamper, shouting, into the next room. Carol tries to limp after them, to keep up with them — but cannot. A slight look of pain is in her eyes. Jack leaps to her side, and her smile welcomes and thanks him as he helps her across the threshold. He stands in the door a moment watching her; closes the door quickly; turns around, his whole attitude bespeaking an almost unbearable heartache. Elfrida's attitude shows that she shares his fears. She steps forward with an involuntary desire to help. Pause.)

ELFRIDA *(softly)*. After all, it's such a happy, useful little life!

JACK *(with a sigh of assent)*. Yes. Thank you for reminding me. *(He comes nearer Elfrida, slowly.)* She's an angel: so is her mother: you're not a bad imitation, yourself. Even I — get off the ground a bit when I'm with her. My brother keeps down the average successfully: nothing angelic about *him*, at the moment. Are n't you coming in to the Christmas tree? *(Turns to the door, right, back.)*

ELFRIDA. I will put all this right, first. (*Points to table; picks up napkins, etc.*)

JACK. Let that effigy of a butler do it.

ELFRIDA. He's busy downstairs.

JACK. Let me help: I'm a lot more agreeable than he is.

ELFRIDA. (*Hesitates.*) It is n't necessary.

JACK. Necessities are cheap and obvious: I'm willing to be a luxury.

ELFRIDA. Are n't you needed — in there?

(*Jack opens the door, slightly. There is sound of childish laughter.*)

LARRY (*shouting, within*). Hurrah!

JACK. I think they can spare me. (*Crosses to Elfrida and helps her pick up the broken bonbons.*)

ELFRIDA. Is n't it odd that Mrs. Ruggles has n't come? She must have understood our invitation.

JACK (*with slight sarcasm*). My brother may be entertaining her in the drawing-room.

ELFRIDA. (*Smiles at the improbability and turns back to table.*) Will you snuff the candles, please?

(*Crosses to right and switches back the lights. Jack goes to table; leans over and blows out the candles, but watches Elfrida as he does so and smiles to himself quizzically.*)

JACK. (*Picks up one of the larger sprigs of holly from the centerpiece; goes nearer Elfrida and just touches her nurse's cap lightly for a single second.*) Take it off, please, and let me put this in.

ELFRIDA (*flushing*). It is my badge: it never disturbs me.

JACK. Nor me! It is honorable, and lovely, and becoming: but, as Carol says, it is n't "Christmasy." Won't you wear the holly instead? Remember, it is a *holi-day*!

ELFRIDA. I don't want to forget that I'm a nurse, Mr. Jack.

JACK. No; and you don't want any one else to, either! Do take off that thing and put in the holly, dear — Miss Elfrida! (*Elfrida does so, Jack aiding a little. Jack stands off, admiringly.*) Now you're much less professional, and much more "Christmasy."

ELFRIDA. (*Blushes, then resumes her businesslike manner.*) Now the table, please. We'll push it back, out of the way.

(*They do so, placing chairs about it, and the screens around it all, hiding it completely. Elfrida has the tablecloth gathered up in her arms. Jack holds the candlesticks. Elfrida leads the way to the door, right; and Jack follows.*)

ELFRIDA (*at the door*). I can manage quite well —

JACK. Without me? (*Laughs.*) That's what I'm afraid of; so I want to prove that you can't. (*Bran-dishing candlesticks.*) Room for the light-bearer, please.

ELFRIDA. (*Is about to yield; then remembers.*) Carol will be waiting for you. She'll want you to amuse the children.

JACK (*handing her the candles*). You're right (*he holds the door open*); as women occasionally are, even when they are inclined to be stubborn. (*Smiles at her. She flushes and turns quickly, meeting Mr. Bird.*)

ELFRIDA. Oh! I beg your — (*Exits.*)

JACK. Well, Don, you've missed —

MR. BIRD (*entering as he speaks*). I've missed nothing! I've heard every shout, every clatter. By George, I could almost hear the little beasts bolting their food. How any one can imagine this is a decent way of celebrating a holiday, I can't think. (*Crosses to left, impatiently.*)

JACK. (*Goes up stage to double doors.*) Come here a minute, Don.

MR. BIRD (*impatiently*). What — Oh, I don't want to see them, I tell you. It's bad enough to know they're here.

JACK. It is n't the Ruggleses I want you to see; it's Carol.

MR. BIRD. (*Comes to center of stage. In the more relenting mood that accompanies any mention of Carol.*) Is she enjoying herself?

JACK. Come and see for yourself.

(*Mr. Bird hesitates, then walks quickly to the door. Jack holds it open, and the two men stand, looking in. Sound of laughing is heard.*)

MR. BIRD (*smiling in spite of himself*). Yes, she is — happy.

PEORIA. (*A little shriek from within.*) That's my candy, Peter!

(*Crash, as of accidental drop of glass or metal.*)

MR. BIRD. (*Turns away.*) Close the door; do! Just as I expected, — they are forgetting themselves and their place.

JACK. Oh, I say, Don! Let the little duffers have

a good time once in their lives. They'll soon be going home now, and it will be all over, and —

MR. BIRD. (*Walks center stage.*) Over? It's just beginning! There's New Year's to come, and Valentine's Day, and Washington's Birthday! All high days and holidays will be packed with Ruggleses. There's no way to end it but moving them away.

JACK. Don! What are you talking about!

MR. BIRD. The Ruggleses. I own their house: I'm going to take it down and put up a conservatory in its place. I've always intended to do it, sooner or later.

JACK. It's a poor day to plan an eviction.

MR. BIRD. Eviction? Stuff — nonsense! Who said anything about eviction? I'm hardly the man for that sort of performance. They will have reasonable notice and find another house. I dare say I shall even find one for them, if only to pacify Carol.

(*Door, right, front, opens.*)

ELFRIDA. (*At door, in joyous voice.*) Come right in here, Mrs. Ruggles, and I'll call Mrs. Bird.

MR. BIRD (*looking toward the double doors; then toward the other door, for escape. Huffily.*) And now it's Mrs. Ruggles! Ugh!

(*Jack steps forward to welcome Mrs. Ruggles. Elfrida stands one side of door; Mr. Bird center of stage, when Mrs. Ruggles enters, very slowly and with very great dignity. She has made a brave "best" with her toilet, but she must NOT be a CARICATURE: the plainest, even shabbiest, dark dress; perhaps a cheap wrap of "circular" variety;*

a bonnet which might have a single note of comedy, say, bright green strings or a red velvet rose.)

JACK (*holding out his hand, cordially*). Good-evening, Mrs. Ruggles. Merry Christmas! (*Elfrida exits door at back.*) This is my brother, Mr. Bird, Mrs. Ruggles.

(Mrs. Ruggles, who, it must be remembered, was a McGill, moves confidently and breezily toward Mr. Bird, hand extended. His hand is not at all in evidence until obliged.)

MRS. RUGGLES (*as Mr. Bird gingerly yields her his hand. Pause*). It is a pleasure to shake you by the hand, Mr. Bird.

(Pause. Mr. Bird fidgets uncomfortably and tries to find words with which to release his hand.)

MRS. RUGGLES. We've been neighbors, you might say, for more'n a year, you an' me: but I don't know's we'd ever met if it had n't been for our children. They begun it, an' now you're followin' suit — *in more ways'n one, so I hear. (Meaningly, for she refers not only to the invitation, but to the buying of the house.)*

(Mr. Bird takes away his hand, which by this time has been well squeezed; turns (not too abruptly); and walks to left. Jack steps to Mrs. Ruggles's side.)

JACK (*quickly*). The dinner was entirely Carol's idea, Mrs. Ruggles.

MR. BIRD. Exactly. I had nothing whatever to do with it.

MRS. RUGGLES. I'm not talkin' about the dinner.
(This with cheerful and humorous meaning.)

JACK. Not the dinner?

MRS. RUGGLES *(smiling at Mr. Bird)*. No; I'm talkin' 'bout the house an' my new landlord.

MR. BIRD. The house?

MRS. RUGGLES. Yes. Mis' Cullen was a-tellin' my Con you've bought it, an' it's for that I wanted to thank you. It's a comf'table feelin', Mr. Bird, to know you're changin' a rude, common man, like Carter's agent, to a fine gentleman like yourself.

MR. BIRD. Er — ah — we'll talk about that later, Mrs. Ruggles.

MRS. RUGGLES. Oh, I know a s'ciety party like this one ain't any place for us to have a good talk over things. I ain't intendin' to mix pleasure an' business; an' I wa'n't plannin' to say nothin' at all about the smoky chimney, nor the leakin' roof, nor any of the little repairs —

MR. BIRD *(tersely)*. I would n't plan too much, for —

MRS. RUGGLES *(quickly; apologetically)*. No, no, sir. I ain't *plannin'* at all. It ain't the improvements I'm thinkin' about — though they'll be welcome; it's just the grand surprise of it, comin' to-day.

(Jack watches Mr. Bird closely.)

MR. BIRD *(abruptly)*. I'd rather not talk about the house, now, please. It's —

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Sees his manner and expression bode no good. Disturbed and conscious of having made some mistake, and so anxious to amend that she offends*

further). I'm sorry, sir, 'f I've done wrong in mentionin' our poor little troubles. 'T ain't because I expect you to lay out money an' fix up the house for them that's only strangers.

MR. BIRD (*irritated by her manner and his conscience*). I've no intention of "fixing it up," madam —

MRS. RUGGLES (*interrupting, and thereby increasing his displeasure*). Indeed, sir, I ain't askin' you to. "Let all *that* come from Mr. Bird," I says to Peter this mornin'. (*Comes nearer to him, timidly and gratefully*.) I'm only glad it's Carol's father 'as bought it, an' I know well enough you did it to please her.

MR. BIRD (*impatiently*). My good woman, I bought the house —

JACK. (*Steps toward center and touches his arm, impetuously*.) Don!

MR. BIRD (*resenting the interference, shuts his lips firmly as he returns Jack's look*). I bought the house, Mrs. Ruggles, because I find I must take it down and use the piece of ground for a conservatory.

(*Mrs. Ruggles catches her breath; her hands give a motion of protest; then she remembers, and makes an attempt to smile.*)

MRS. RUGGLES. Tear — it — down! (*Wipes her mouth, nervously. Mr. Bird crosses to left and stands with his back toward Mrs. Ruggles, as though unwilling to witness her trouble. Jack crosses to Mrs. Ruggles, and "stands by," as the nautical term is. Mrs. Ruggles looks up at Jack and speaks as though hoping she has misunderstood.*) Did he say "tear it down"?

(The knob of door, right, back, rattles.)

CAROL *(heard, but not seen)*. All right, Dr. Bob. I'll rest a minute — just to please you.

(Mr. Bird turns at the sound of Carol's voice.)

JACK. *(Goes to Mrs. Ruggles. Speaks gently.)* Please don't let the child see that anything is wrong. *(Mrs. Ruggles nods up at him, and assumes a more cheerful manner.)* And you count on me, anyway. Do you understand?

MRS. RUGGLES *(nervously)*. Thank you, sir; but I guess I'd better be a-goin'.

JACK. Not for the world. See how Carol is watching for you.

(Mrs. Ruggles steps up stage so that she is opposite the double doors. Jack stands right, Mr. Bird still at left and slightly in the shadow.)

(Carol comes in, slowly; sees Mrs. Ruggles; limps toward her in quick, eager welcome, one hand outstretched. Mrs. Ruggles steps forward quickly to meet her greeting.)

CAROL *(gayly)*. O Mrs. Ruggles! We're so glad! Now that you've come, Christmas is just perfect: is n't it, mother?

MRS. BIRD *(coming forward in welcome, stands back of Carol, who is thus between the two mothers, both of whom are watching her tenderly and protectingly)*. We're very pleased to have you with us, Mrs. Ruggles.

MRS. RUGGLES. *(Holds Carol's hand and pats it with slow, protecting, and unconscious gesture as her eyes return the smile in Carol's eyes.)* Blessed little

creetur! (*Touches her hand softly.*) You've allus ben settin' up in the winder, like a lily growin' under glass, an' I ain't never seen yer, close to. I hope yer ain't steppin' on yer lame leg too much.

CAROL. (*Thanks her with a glance.*) Not a bit. O Uncle Jack! (*Points her finger at him.*) You're deserting Dr. Bob, and Elfrida needs you — to help with the games.

JACK. Games? Very well. I fly at the word of command.

(*Exit Jack.*)

(*Mr. Bird walks up stage, center; stands with his hands on Carol's chair; pushes it forward, slightly.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*trying to get in touch with the company and party, and always endeavoring to express her gratitude*). Well, Miss Carol, everybody is having a sure-enough celebration to-day, thanks to you.

MR. BIRD. Come, Carol; rest. You've been doing altogether too much.

MRS. RUGGLES. (*Comes forward, her motherly anxiety to the fore, though shown in a too voluble and bustling sympathy.*) That's just what I was a-feared of, though I made the childern promise to be careful and quiet. But you know 'bout childern! They fer-git, sometimes; and mine ain't had the advantages I had when I was their age, movin' in the best circles o' Pittsburg, you might say, though my brother, bein' a policeman, was obliged to live right in town, to be near his job. I've trained 'em all I could for this party; but you know well 'nough how 't is 'bout

s'ciety — you've got to go into it more'n once to make good!

MRS. BIRD. The children have behaved beautifully.

CAROL (*ecstatically*). Have n't they, mother! And have n't we had a good time? It's been the very happiest of all the Christmases.

MR. BIRD. *Happiest, Carol?*

CAROL. Yes, Daddy; the very happiest! (*Slowly and shyly.*) I can't just put it into words — but, somehow, to-night, I've had some one to play and dance my feelings for me.

(*Mr. Bird gives a quick gesture. It is a new idea to him.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*proudly*). My Kitty is real lively on her legs. If 't wa'n't so kind o' risky, I dunno but I'd let her be one o' them stage dancers.

CAROL. It is n't Kitty only; it's Clem, and Larry, and Peter, and Peory, — and Cornelius, — and Sarah Maud.

MRS. RUGGLES. (*Claps her hands with an amazed smile*). NOT — Sarah Maud!

CAROL. Oh, yes: Sarah Maud most of all!

MRS. RUGGLES. You don't ever mean Sarah Maud — dancin'!

CAROL (*with a child's literal honesty*). Well — not really — and truly — dancing: — but *almost*.

MRS. RUGGLES. Then it's your sweet little self that done it. (*Looks her wonder into Mrs. Bird's watching eyes.*) Sarah Maud almost dancin'! It's somethin' she ain't never had time to do afore.

CAROL. Oh, yes! — with Larry, in the yard: I've seen her.

MRS. RUGGLES. That's dooty! Sarah Maud would dance for dooty all day an' all night.

MRS. BIRD. Well, it was n't duty this evening: it was joy, as Carol says. (*Looks at Mr. Bird, who moves uneasily, troubled that he is touched.*)

CAROL (*putting her hand on Mrs. Ruggles's arm*). And it was *your* children that made it all. We almost ought to thank you, Mrs. Ruggles, for having such a nice — large — family.

(*Mr. Bird moves, uneasily. Mrs. Bird smiles.*)

MRS. RUGGLES (*embarrassed*). Oh, you're quite welcome. Sometimes I've thought, myself, 't was a little mite — *too* large; but, after ail, Ruggles an' I could n't spare none of 'em.

CAROL. Neither could I. (*Mr. Bird looks up, quickly.*) Sometimes, when it seems awfully long to wait before they come home from school, I think how lonely I'd be — if they did n't come home at all.

MRS. RUGGLES (*slowly*). Yes; — I'd be lonesome enough, too, — 'thout that. Land sakes! it's all there is, — with Ruggles allers off ter sea.

(*Mr. Bird is breathing slowly, and with less and less of his usual aplomb.*)

MRS. BIRD (*brightly*). We're keeping Mrs. Ruggles from the Tree, Carol.

CAROL. Oh, dear! How could we forget? She has n't even seen it. Daddy (*Mr. Bird steps to her side and stands beside her affectionately*), will you take

Mrs. Ruggles in to the Tree, please? (*Mrs. Ruggles is embarrassed. Mr. Bird hesitates.*) I want mother a minute all to myself.

MR. BIRD. I'm afraid you're tired.

CAROL (*brightly*). No, indeed; — but Dr. Bob says I must rest a few minutes. Won't you go in and play with the children, Daddy dear, — just for a little while?

MR. BIRD (*slowly*). I'm not much good at that sort of thing, Carol.

CAROL (*smiling up at him*). Oh, yes, you are, Daddy, — *when you feel like it.*

MR. BIRD (*turning his eyes away*). They've Uncle Jack; they don't need me.

CAROL (*pulling his sleeve and waiting until he looks at her*). But, Daddy, you have n't been part of this Christmas at all, yet!

MR. BIRD. (*Hesitates, indicating his struggle; then leans over her.*) Well, I give up! I'll fall into line and be "a part," as you say. (*Goes to Mrs. Ruggles, and, with grave courtesy, offers her his arm.*) Mrs. Ruggles, may I —

MRS. RUGGLES (*perturbed and flustered*). Oh, sir, I don't need leadin'! I'm as light on my feet as ever I was. I can go alone all right.

MR. BIRD (*with an effort*). I know you can, but, after all, we're neighbors, Mrs. Ruggles; and I want to be just a little "Christmasy," as Carol says. (*Mrs. Ruggles slowly and timidly takes his arm, and they go to the door, right, back. He steps aside, with deference. Mrs. Ruggles drops a funny curtsy; then*

turns and bows to Carol and Mrs. Bird. Mr. Bird turns; and Carol throws him a kiss, which he returns.) I'm going in, to be "a part."

CAROL. Oh, thank you, Daddy. (*Mr. Bird looks at her, drinking in her gratitude, then exits, while the audience feels sure that the Ruggles family will never be evicted. The door closes, and the sound of childish voices is shut out. Mrs. Bird has the chair placed before the windows. Carol seats herself, slowly and wearily, but giving no sense of exhaustion.*) Is n't it time for the music, mother?

MRS. BIRD (*covering Carol with a soft, fleecy, white rug*). I think so, dear. (*Opens wide the curtains, and the light falls upon Carol.*)

CAROL. I'd like it if the candles were out. (*Mrs. Bird goes quickly and turns out the candle lights.*) Then will you open the window a little?

MRS. BIRD. Are you sure it is n't too cold?

CAROL. O mother dear, — I'm covered so warm, and — I do love the winter air when it's filled with snow! (*Moment of joy and content. Mrs. Bird opens the center window, and there is a glimpse of a bright, snow-filled night. Carol sits erect and holds out her arms in a happy, welcoming gesture.*) Is n't it beautiful, mother?

MRS. BIRD. (*Comes to Carol and stands by her chair.*) It is very beautiful!

(*Mr. Bird opens the door at right. There is a slight sound of voices.*)

MR. BIRD. Can you come, Mary, for a minute? Mrs. Ruggles and the children are going home.

MRS. BIRD. You say "good-night" for me, Don. I'll stay with Carol —

CAROL (*sitting up*). Please go, mother. They'd like to see you —

MRS. BIRD (*uncertainly*). But you —

CAROL. O mother, I'm quite comfy, and happy. If you'll turn me a little more to the window. (*Mrs. Bird moves the chair so that Carol is almost facing the light. The top of her head and a bit of her cheek are visible, but it is a quiet, soothing picture.*) I'm — so — sleepy —

(*Mrs. Bird gives a motherly tuck to the rug; then joins Mr. Bird who waits in the door. As she comes, he holds out his hand and she takes it. They stand together, looking at Carol; then exit, and the door closes after them. After a minute's pause, the doors that conceal the Christmas Tree open stealthily. Sarah Maud peeps in; then comes in quickly, running softly to Carol's chair. She is a transformed Sarah Maud. Her eyes are bright; her cheeks pink; her hair, that has been heretofore pulled away from her face into two tight braids, has escaped from its bondage and flows more loosely, softening the careworn young face. A thin, white scarf, one of her presents, conceals her stooping, angular shape. She holds a book and a little box or two tied up with tissue paper and ribbons.*)

SARAH MAUD. I would n't let the others come in: I jest stole away. It's been the best evenin', an' the grandest time that ever our folks had. I guess they

don't have no better times in Heaven than this was!

CAROL. (*Lifts herself a little from the pillow and puts out her hand. Sleepily.*) I loved it, too, Sarah Maud.

SARAH MAUD (*putting her back on the pillow*). Don't you stir. Lay right back and sleep good; and don't you hang out no hank'chif to-morrer! Our house'll be kep' so quiet for yer you'll think we're all sick abed. Good-bye. (*Steals out softly and quickly. Pause.*)

(*The music is heard, first very softly, then more, and more distinctly; and the light at the windows grows slowly brighter. Carol raises herself a trifle for a moment to hear it better, then settles back with a happy smile. As the music increases in definiteness, the light in the center window grows brighter, and the Angel of the Crutches appears, the same who was the Home-Finder in the Prologue. Her gown is a blur of soft, shimmering colors. She smiles down at Carol, tiptoes to her chair, gently touches her hair, then stoops and lifts the little crutch — lifts it beautifully, and with all the spiritual meaning she is able to convey; then, with it in her arm, she backs slowly on to and out from the open window-ledge, and, as the curtain falls, she stands framed in the window; — but before the curtain is quite down, the Angel and the crutch have disappeared.*)

(*The winter light and the Christmas music come in through the open window, snowflakes flutter past, and the Play is ended.*)

(The children in the audience probably think that Carol has given her crutch to the famous Dr. Bob; as for their mothers and fathers — they feel that, at any rate, the crutch will never be used, or needed, any more!)

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